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WONDERS OF NATURE

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THE WORLD OF STRANGE PHENOMENA

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OF THE HAUNTED
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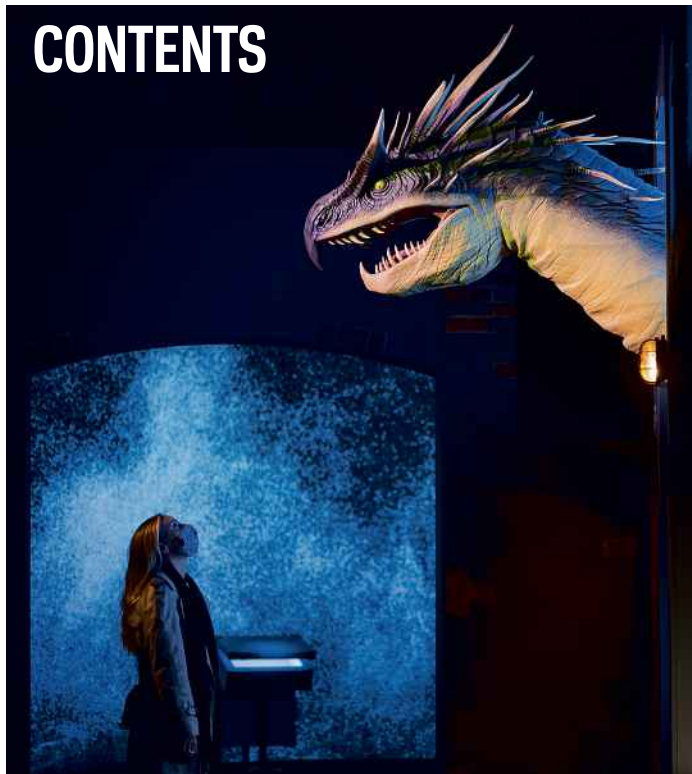


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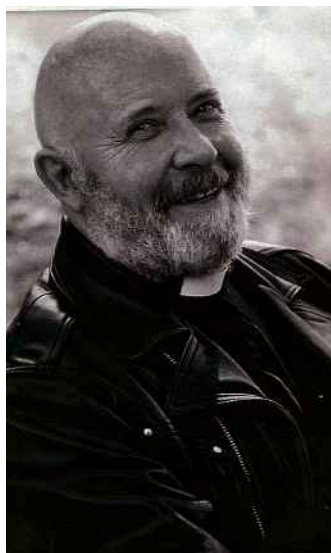


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Everything you always wanted to know about *Fortean Times* but were too paranoid to ask!

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EDITORIAL



CAPUCINE DESLOUIS

INDEXING THE WORLD OF WEIRD

Welcome to another issue of FT, and a snapshot of our mad planet from the vantage point of mid-January 2021. Thus far, anyone hoping that the year ahead would be a bit less weird than the one that preceded it is likely to be feeling disappointed. It is important that we can put new manifestations of strangeness into some sort of context; so as the team digs in, ready to chronicle another 12 months of strangeness, FT founder Bob Rickard updates us on the evolving project to index over 45 years of *Fortean Times*.

INDEXING UPDATE 2021

It is with some astonishment that I remember us starting on the indexing test of FT67 in 2014. The scanning of back issues had been going on for some years before that, but six years of hard work by you, our indexing team, from 2014 has seen us pass the first third of the back issues (with FT at issue 402, we are working on the 150s).

Towards the end of 2020, I had to make an important decision about the eventual form of the index, based on a better appreciation of the difficulties ahead – something made clearer by progressing sections of the index through the stages necessary for an eventually functioning whole.

My original idea was a grand wiki-based hyper-linked structure, with the potential to link to detailed info pages in the manner of an encyclopædia. The key choke point was the time needed for the necessary mark-up coding and formatting. This would take it way beyond my remaining lifetime, even if a coder could devise a way of automating it all. There were intermediate stages, too, that would need an experienced fortéan's skill in preserving the complicated relationships between entries, as well as being able to 'add value' to entries along the way. Hands-on experience would also be needed to cope with the inevitable (informational and formatting) corrections and improvements.

With this impossible workload in mind, I conducted a poll of staff and contributors to get an idea of the essential priorities among the current list of 11 categories.

The top priority by far is for 'Names' to be completed. Just as useful but not as urgent were 'Topics', 'Animals', 'Contributors' and 'Contents', followed by 'Dates' and 'Places'.

Given the slow rate of progress, any sort of 'completion' would have been very far in the future, if all categories were given equal time and priority. Consequently, from now on the first priority is to complete the

indexing of names up to FT400. After that, the priority will shift to 'Topics' and so on. So as well as preparing all the batches, I'm mapping out 'Names'. From each indexed issue, I extract the name entries (several hundreds), switch the surnames to first position and then compile them alphabetically. The order of details on each entry is checked, changed if necessary, and any additional information added. Then formatting codes are applied to the surname and issue number, so we end up with something like this:

Adolphus, Frederick (King of Sweden) ~ 58:59-63 ~ 101:45 ~*

And what of the eventual Index itself?

My plan is to find or build a site on which to house the FT Index, which will be freely available to anyone. Hopefully, this will be an already functioning archive site, such as AFU (see: <http://www.afu.se/afu2/>). The Index will have a number of supplementary pages, such as: a progress page to show the status of issues, pages and topics currently entered and available; a history of the index development; and a feedback method for reporting errors and omissions.

At a suitable time, I would like to commission a small number of 'editors' whose job it will be to implement corrections and to add any necessary further information to entries. The importance of adding good qualifying information to names (imagine searching for your 'needle' among the haystack that is several pages of 'Browns') is something that we have become aware of. I am sending a note to all indexers about it and will provide a better description of the 'Names' category on the Returns form.

2020 has been a very strange year for everyone, but indexing a page of FT must be among the best ways to pass the time. Once again, I thank each and every one of you for volunteering your time and patience, completing your batches, sticking with the task.

VOLUNTEER FOR THE FT INDEXING PROJECT!

Our volunteers are doing something rather wonderful and creating something really useful. The work is solitary, sometimes boring and strangely heroic. It's not for everyone, but if you'd like to join the effort, contact me.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, EMAIL
FT-BOBRICKARD@MAIL.COM

spurious transients

Something STRANGE

Came Out Of The Skies

A documentary soundtrack
concept album based
on the real-life
"Welsh Triangle"
UFO incidents
of 1977

Military Cover-Ups?

Close Encounters

Teleporting
Cows

Silver
Giants

UFOs



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A DIGEST OF THE WORLDWIDE WEIRD

STRANGE DAYS

WHO IS THE Q SHAMAN?

Whatever his real name, he's a one-man mash-up of New Age conspiracism

By the time this issue hits the newsstands, we will know whether President-elect Joe Biden's inauguration on 20 January was marked by violent protest similar to that seen on 6 January in Washington DC, when thousands of Donald Trump's supporters stormed the United States Capitol building while Congress was certifying Biden's election victory. Scenes of the violent protest/riot, which led to the deaths of five people, were captured on film, often by the rioters themselves. Among the more surreal images that appeared were those depicting the so-called 'Q Shaman' (aka Jake Angeli, aka Jacob Chansley), currently in federal custody and refusing food because it is not organic.

He is a well-known presence at protests supporting Trump's claims of a rigged election or opposing Covid-19 lockdowns. He is also a familiar figure at climate change protests and as a counter-protestor at Black Lives Matter events. While the Norse neopagan symbols with which Chansley is tattooed might suggest an affinity with neo-Nazi and white supremacist groups, his 'ghost bison' headgear is suggestive of Native American mythology. In a 2020 interview he explained that the fur was coyote, alluding to Coyote's trickster identity. He also linked his red, white and blue face paint to Native American traditions, calling it "war paint", and claiming that he is on the side of the "angels" in a "spiritual war". In his Twitter biography, he describes himself as a "Spiritual &



ABOVE: 'Q Shaman'. aka Jake Angeli, aka Jacob Chansley, photographed inside the US Capitol building after it had been invaded by a mob of pro-Trump rioters.

Political Consultant, Shamanic Practitioner Author, Energetic Healer, Ordained Minister, Seeker of Truth & Servant of God". He has been seen at other protests banging a drum and chanting, and claims to have walked a shamanic path for 20 years.

This melange of far-right ideology and QAnon ideas of 'elite' human trafficking paedophile rings with those of the New Age – climate change, 5G, energy healing and Native American spirituality – might seem surprising. Chansley has certainly immersed himself thoroughly in New

Age thought, as may be seen in his 2018 book *Will & Power*, published under yet another pseudonym, 'Yellowstone Wolf'. This self-published work has the lot – aliens, meditation and psychedelics, fractal energy, frequencies and chakras, through to sacred geometry, astrology, and so on and on. He describes himself as a 'starseed', a person with an extraterrestrial consciousness intertwined with their human physical form.

Chansley unites New Age and QAnon or far-right concerns by arguing that 'dark cabals' or 'elites' are seeking to prevent humankind's spiritual evolution,

because it threatens their plans for a one world government and total dominance of the Earth. In the UK, such an admixture of ideas is not unfamiliar, being reminiscent of David Icke's interweaving of the anti-Semitic *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and ideas of globalist conspiracy with New Ageism, reincarnation and a belief that the Universe, made of 'vibrational' energy, consists of multiple dimensions (from some of which hail his trademark reptilian shapeshifters).

But perhaps in the US such 'conspiracism' is a newer phenomenon, giving rise to suspicions that Chansley is not who he appears to be. His concerns about greenhouse gases and other pollutants, when many on the Right are climate change deniers, has led to doubts and allegations that he is simply a 'crisis actor', perhaps a covert Antifa agitator seeking to besmirch the image of pro-Trump patriots. This cognitive dissonance, whereby huge numbers of Americans genuinely believe (with no evidence), that Trump won the election by a landslide but was robbed of victory, or that the violent rioters at the Capitol building on 6 January were not Trump supporters but (again, without evidence) Black Lives Matter or Antifa protestors is another forteen phenomenon deserving of our attention. But that will have to wait for another issue, by which time we at Fortean Towers have hopefully not been incarcerated in vast underground prison camps staffed by reptilian aliens with glowing chakras. *YouTube, 'QAnon Shaman – Jake Angeli – Interview – ORF, 6 Jan; religiondispatches.org, 11 Jan 2021.*



BEATING THE DEVIL

Exorcists find work in a global pandemic

PAGE 8



SO GO DOWNTOWN

The man behind the Nashville bombing

PAGE 26



THE NAME'S BOND...

British diplomat, secret agent or clever decoy?

PAGE 27

DISCLOSURE: TRUMP IS AN ALIEN

The former President probably existed long before the Earth came into being



CHIP SOMODEVILLA / GETTY IMAGES

ABOVE: Richard Van Steenberg (left) has suggested that former President Trump (right) is an incredibly ancient alien being that can shed its mortal form and shapeshift into something else.

The year 2020, of course, saw all manner of fringe ‘conspiracy’ or ‘alternate reality’ theories that challenge the mainstream media’s (MSM) narrative. What with QAnon, the Plandemic, the Great Reset – with George Soros and Bill Gates apparently playing major roles, especially with regard to a SARS-2-CoV vaccine – it was a bumper year. One of the most far-out theories to date was that advanced by Richard Van Steenberg, who, when prompted by the news that then-President Trump had tested positive for the Covid-19 virus, tweeted: “Earthlings, prepare to be attacked...”

Three years ago, Steenberg started an online petition called ‘Disclose: Humanoid Extra Terrestrials Live Among Us’, which garnered over 10,000 signatures. With 30,000 Twitter followers, Steenberg is by no means a lone crank (although it could be argued that the rise of social media has allowed lone cranks to be alone no more), but he is a purveyor of bizarre ideas that are largely divorced from the observable Universe. Although he clearly has a following,

his beliefs are regarded as on the extreme fringe even for the UFO disclosure community.

Steenberg, like many others, believes that aliens with bad intentions have been visiting Earth for some time. “If you take the time to understand the possibility of ET being able to exist in Humanoid form (Humanoid ET),” he wrote, “you would realise they can live among us and we will just think they are EA (EArthlings).”

Steenberg argues that there are countless alien-human hybrids coexisting with humans, many of whom holding positions of power, whether as celebrities or corporate CEOs. These malefic extraterrestrials, he believes, are planning to subvert humanity and take control of us via psychological manipulation. Unlike QAnon, which sees Trump in valiant opposition to an elite group of paedophile adrenochrome junkies, Steenberg sees the former President as being

on the aliens’ side. If, as is suspected, the Donald is an immortal alien, then his bout with coronavirus may well have been a cover story while he attempted to shed his mortal flesh and shapeshift into something else.

“The plan has been in action since they put us on the planet as cavemen,” explained Steenberg. “I would say Trump is either a HET [human alien hybrid] or CEA [a human complicit in the alien plot] in that he has known what is going on certainly for the better part of his public life on EArth and would have known early on he would be President. If he’s an HET [human alien hybrid], it’s very probable he existed before EArth and took part in the design of the ETA [the plot to invade].”

How President-elect Joe Biden and Vice-President Kamala Harris fit into all this remains to be seen. *Vice*, 5 Oct 2020.

EXTRA! EXTRA!



FT'S FAVOURITE HEADLINES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

STARLING TO OPEN OFFICE IN SOUTHAMPTON BY SUMMER

<|> 12 Mar 2019

Revisiting China's half-dead zombie factories

Toronto Star, 5 Mar 2016.

MILITANT ELVIS PARTY OFFERS 'POPULAR' POLICIES

<|> 9 Dec 2019.

Trains running on lemon juice

Sun, 15 Dec 2019.

ORDER OF CANADA TO 'QUEEN OF GIRAFFES'

Toronto Star, 28 Dec 2019.

Why scientists are flying drones into clouds of whale snot

wired.com, 10 Jan 2020.

SIDELINES...

MASK SCAM

A conman stole over \$100,000 from customers at casinos in Michigan and Kansas using a prosthetic mask. John Colletti, 55, disguised himself as an elderly man to evade suspicion, targeting his victims by illegally obtaining personal information and using counterfeit driver's licences to withdraw funds from their personal bank accounts via self-service kiosks at the casinos. *edition.cnn.com*, 25 July 2020.

DEMANDING GUESTS

A survey of hotel chain Travelodge's 575 UK and 10 Irish hotels has revealed various bizarre requests made by guests, including wanting a spare bed for a child's imaginary friend and a spare room to store 200 butterflies for a wedding. Other customers asked for a bag of soil from Liverpool's Anfield stadium, enquired how to get an honorary degree from Oxford University for a grandmother, and insisted staff stop seagulls from squealing as they were keeping them awake. *irishexaminer.com*, 13 Nov 2020.

KIDDIE FLINGERS

An elementary school in France has asked parents not to fling their children over the closed gate. The Trillade school in Avignon put up signs outside the gate with a cartoon of a parent hurling a small child over the fence. The text requests that mothers or fathers, if they arrive late, do not to throw their children into school but instead wait for the gates to be opened again at 10:00 or 15:00. *[UPI]* 13 Nov 2020.



MARTIN ROSS

COVID CORNER | Covid dreams collected, coronavirus cancellations and other pandemic news



PAUL BALDESARE

ABOVE: A sleeping taxi driver in Lime Street, City of London, c. 1990. The Museum of London has been collecting dreams during the Covid-19 pandemic.

LONDON'S COVID DREAMS

A collaborative project between the Museum of London and the Museum of Dreams at Western University in Canada is curating peoples' dreams during the coronavirus pandemic, collected recordings of conversations between volunteers and psychoanalysts in which they discuss their dreams and their possible meanings.

The Guardians of Sleep project (its name inspired by Freud's description of dreams as the 'guardians of sleep', wherein dreams are seen as night watchmen who help to preserve the integrity of the mind) seeks to record the powerful, bizarre and sometimes unsettling thoughts and images engendered by the pandemic.

Across the globe, vivid dreams have been a feature of 2020, attributed variously to the fact of many people working from home and therefore staying asleep for longer, or to a lack of external stimuli during lockdowns causing the brain to generate its own. "Life is a little bit more dull in the lockdown and there is this juxtaposition with dream life where we create something more exciting," said Foteini Aravani, the Museum of London's digital curator. She explained that the work is part of the museum's efforts to tell the story of London through the pandemic.

"Sleep – and our sleep pattern

– was one of the first things that shifted and changed, almost immediately after the lockdown happened," she explained. "What I wanted to capture was the experience that possibly the pandemic is not only affecting our conscious lives, but also our subconscious, our dream life. As part of the Collecting Covid initiative, we will gather dreams as first-person oral histories, with the aim to provide a more emotional and personal narrative of this time." She made the point that the collection of Londoners' dreams helps stretch the definition of a 'museum object'. The project will capture dreams without interpretation or analysis, but the testimonies will be made available for research. "I want to have the voice of the dreamers in our collection," said Aravani.

Dr Valdas Noreika, a lecturer in psychology at Queen Mary University of London, said: "There is already preliminary evidence that the Covid pandemic altered our sleep patterns as well as dream contents. For instance, people report more anger and sadness words, and there is a frequent mention of contamination and cleanness in pandemic dreams".

For another project collecting Covid dreams, see **FT397:8-9**. *E.Standard; Guardian*, 26 Nov 2020.

CHILD-EATING OGRES

Several traditional and venerable Japanese festivals and customs have been amended for reasons of Covid-19 safety. One example is the northern Japanese tradition of *namahage*, an annual New Year's Eve tradition, some 200 years old, in which male volunteers dress up as *oni*, or ogres, wearing straw cloaks and carrying fake knives, and go hunting for disobedient children to eat. The typical *namahage* routine in Japanese villages sees the ogres visiting local homes looking for naughty children. To keep them happy, a tribute of *sake* and *mochi* (sticky rice cake) is prepared for the *namahage* to drink and eat. This year, however, the ogres won't be entering peoples' homes and organisers are asking local households not to provide the usual offerings. Volunteer helpers will be expected to wear face masks. However, the experience will maintain some of its comic menace, as the *namahage* will be roaming the streets brandishing paper-maché knives and shouting their signature catchphrase: "Any naughty children around?" *soranews24.com*, 8 Nov 2020.

STONEHENGE CANCELLED

Senior Druid King Arthur Pendragon complained that English Heritage was "using the Covid crisis as an excuse" to stop people celebrating the Winter Solstice at Stonehenge. The event can attract crowds of up to 5,000 people, and English Heritage said it made the decision following advice from Wiltshire Council and Wiltshire Police. But Arthur Pendragon argued that the Solstice celebration "should be open as other places of worship are... It is very frustrating that English Heritage are using the Covid crisis as an excuse not to open Stonehenge", he said. "My argument is it should be open as other places of

worship are like temples, mosques, churches and synagogues". At the time, Wiltshire was in the Tier 2 category, which permits people to



JUNKO KIMURA / GETTY IMAGES



“attend places of worship for a service”. This generally applies to enclosed spaces, but, as Mr Pendragon pointed out: “You can’t get more Covid-secure than you can in the middle of the field... if you can’t be socially distanced in a field in Salisbury Plain, where can you?” He said that he planned to observe the sunrise “as close as legally possible” to the stones from adjacent land.

An English Heritage spokesperson said: “Our plan to live-stream the Winter Solstice – a spiritually significant time for many – is supported by representatives of the Pagan and Druid groups with whom we work. Although disappointed that they cannot attend in person, the community respects the fact that the pandemic and its safety restrictions are exceptional circumstances”. *BBC News, 20 Dec 2020.*

WUHAN LAB LEAK

In an online meeting with international politicians, a senior US government official spoke of compelling evidence that the SARS-Cov-2 virus did not originate in Wuhan’s wet market, and that even China’s leaders are now openly admitting their previous claims to that effect are false. Matthew Pottinger, Donald Trump’s Deputy National Security Adviser, said the latest intelligence indicated the virus

had come from the Wuhan Institute of Virology, 11 miles (18km) from the market, in a leak or accident: “There is a growing body of evidence that the lab is likely the most credible source of the virus.”

Former Conservative Party leader Iain Duncan-Smith, who was present at the meeting, said he was told that US authorities are currently talking to a ‘whistleblower’, an ex-scientist from the Wuhan laboratory who is now in America.

Theories that the COVID-19 virus was accidentally leaked from the Wuhan institute were cited by Donald Trump on several occasions during his presidency. In May last year he claimed the coronavirus outbreak was the result of a “horrible mistake” in China and that he had seen evidence of the virus having originated in a Wuhan lab. Trump added the Chinese regime then tried to cover up their blunder but “couldn’t put out the fire.”

In December 2020, a Chinese journalist who exposed the “cover up” was jailed for four years for “trouble making”. Zhang Zhan, 37, was found guilty of “picking quarrels and provoking trouble” after a brief hearing in Shanghai. The Pudong New Area Peoples’ Court claimed she spread false information, gave interviews to foreign media, disrupted public order and maliciously

manipulated the pandemic. Ms Zhang had travelled to Wuhan to collect first-hand accounts of life under lockdown and posted videos of crematoria working at midnight, casting doubt on the official death toll which was, at the time, under 3,500 people. Even today, China maintains its total number of deaths from COVID-19 is less than 5,000, a surprisingly low figure when compared with the UK’s 75,000, India’s 150,000, Brazil’s 200,000, or the USA’s 360,000 deaths (China has a population of around 1.5 billion people, India 1.4 billion, Brazil 212 million, the USA 330 million, and the UK 68 million). *D.Mail, 2 Jan; Sun, 3 Jan 2021.*

MASK SAVES YOUR BACON

A Minnesota-based deli meat manufacturer has created a bacon-scented face mask. “Using the latest in bacon-smell technology and irresistibly breathable, two-ply fabric, finally, bacony bliss can be with you always – even while out in public,” states the Hormel Foods website. The Hormel Black Label Breathable Bacon mask cannot be purchased, but lucky winners may receive one free, if fortunate enough to be chosen from numerous entrants. A representative for the meat company said the response has been “overwhelming”. *cnet.com, 15 Oct 2020.*

SIDELINES...

DOUGHNUT DISGRACE

A Cambridgeshire policeman is facing dismissal after he allegedly tried to buy a tray of £9.95 Krispy Kreme doughnuts for 7p. PC Simon Read is accused of sticking a barcode for a pack of carrots onto the Krispy Kreme box and then scanning it at a self-service checkout at Tesco Extra, Wisbech. *E.Standard, 18 Nov 2020.*

PIGEON POST

A tiny capsule containing a message written by a Prussian soldier during World War I and borne by a carrier pigeon has been found in eastern France by a French couple. The message, from an infantry soldier based at Ingersheim and dated 1916, detailed military manoeuvres and was addressed to a superior officer. At the time, Ingersheim, now in France’s Grand Est department, was part of Germany. *Sky News, 9 Nov 2020.*

STUFFED PARROTS

Dozens of parrots stuffed in plastic bottles were found on a ship docked in Indonesia’s eastern province of Papua. The crew discovered 64 live parrots and 10 dead birds after hearing noises coming from inside a large box. Indonesia is home to the highest number of threatened bird species in Asia, and smuggling is rife. *BBC News, 20 Nov 2020.*

FIXING A HOLE

A Massachusetts man fed up with local potholes decided to plant tiny Christmas trees in the holes in a bid to force officials to repair the road. Kevin Martin decided on his plan one Saturday night, when he hit a series of potholes and ended up with all four flat tyres. He bought some planting soil and some small Christmas trees, then planted them on Monday morning on his way to work. *[UPI] 10 Nov 2020.*

NICE TO HAVE A HOBBY 1

A Taiwan artist was awarded a Guinness World Record for carving a chain of 168 links from pencil graphite. Lee Chien-chu originally held the record for most chain links carved from pencil lead in 2019 with his 101-link chain, but lost it earlier this year to an Indian artist whose chain featured 126 links. Lee has now regained the crown by altering his carving technique. *[UPI] 30 Sept 2020.*



ABOVE: King Arthur Pendragon and friend on the Winter Solstice at the closed Stonehenge on 21 December 2020.



SIDELINES...

NICE TO HAVE A HOBBY 2

An Indian teenager attained a Guinness World Record for the longest hair on a teenager. Nilanshi Patel's hair was measured days before her 18th birthday at a length of 6ft 6.7in (200cm). Nilanshi said she has been growing her hair ever since getting a bad haircut at age six: "I got my hair cut, a really bad haircut. So, then I decided that I won't cut my hair." [UPI] 5 Nov 2020.

ASSAULT ON PRECINCT 13 REDUX

A goat, a sheep and three lambs besieged a Turkish city hall, trapping municipal workers inside the building. Nevsehir Municipality tweeted a video showing the group of animals wandering around outside and chasing after security guards as they attempted to leave. "We have been captured by 1 sheep, 1 goat, 3 lambs," the tweet said. Animal experts arrived at the scene and rounded up the aggressive gang, who were returned to their owner. [UPI] 17 Dec 2020.

HANDED OFF

A Slovenian woman sawed off her own hand with her boyfriend's help as part of an insurance scam. Julija Adlesic, 22, had taken out five insurance policies the previous year, standing to gain over €1m (£900,000). She claimed the 'accident' had occurred while cutting branches, and now faces two years imprisonment. Her boyfriend, who had researched artificial hands on the Internet prior to the DIY amputation, was given three years. A court heard how the pair had deliberately left the severed hand behind rather than taking it with them to hospital. BBC News, 12 Sept 2020.

BEAT THE DEVIL | Statue-toppling protestors and the global pandemic keep exorcists busy



ABOVE: San Francisco's Archbishop Salvatore Joseph Cordileone arrives to conduct an exorcism outside the Church of Saint Raphael in San Rafael, California. BELOW: The statue of Father Junipero Serra is daubed and toppled by protestors last October.

STATUE TOPPLED AND SITE EXORCISED

On 17 October, the Archbishop of San Francisco performed a short exorcism ceremony outside a church in San Rafael, California, where protesters had earlier toppled a statue of Father Junipero Serra, an 18th-century Spanish Franciscan missionary priest. Serra established missions in Mexico in the 1750s and 1760s and converted many indigenous Mexican people, later travelling north to what is now California, where he established nine missions, spending the rest of his life attempting to convert local Native Americans. Critics say Serra forced them to abandon their culture or face imprisonment, corporal punishment and torture. He was canonised in 2015 by Pope Francis.

Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone performed the ritual before 150 supporters before holding a special Mass inside St Raphael Catholic Church. He said the ceremony was intended to drive out evil and defend Serra's reputation. Statues of Fr Serra had earlier been toppled by activists in San Francisco (19 June), Los Angeles (20 June) and Sacramento (4 July). *kolotv.com*, 17 Oct 2020.

DIABOLIC ATTACKS AND CORONAVIRUS

Fr Ronnie Ablong, one of two exorcists of the Diocese of Dumaguete in the Philippines, has warned that the coronavirus pandemic and its accompanying social restrictions leave people vulnerable to diabolic attack. He said that people dealing with mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical stress and other disorders during the crisis are prone to the deceptions of Satan and his demons: "The Devil is always around 24/7, and rides on to events in our surroundings, such as our problems, trials, illnesses, pain, and crisis." At the start of the pandemic, he explained that Manila exorcists

asked him to join them in a live-streamed deliverance prayer "to curb the effects of the Devil's actions, especially at a time of confusion," adding that one of two things can happen in such a time of great trial. "Either we grow spiritually or we get discouraged and then we question God why is this happening," he said. "The ordinary action of the Devil is temptation, which happens every day and to anyone, but there is also what we call extraordinary diabolical action."

Fr Ablong, 51, has investigated numerous demonic attacks and has been "evicting demons and diabolical spiritual forces" for over three years now. He



MARTIN ROSS

JESSICA CHRISTIAN / THE SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE VIA GETTY IMAGES

KVLU.COM



explained that many people are unaware there are different stages or forms of diabolical attacks, ranging from slight to moderate to severe. Sometimes, he says, the Devil can be outside or sometimes inside a person, and places or objects may also be subject to demonic infestation.

He believes psychological cases of obsession, “negative and excessive thoughts” that the person cannot control, are caused by the Devil attacking a person mentally. A more serious form of attack is that of physical assault, with the most severe being diabolical possession, when a demonic spirit takes over a person’s body. He cautioned against “occult practices” like the Ouija board, palm readers, card readers, fortune-tellers, and practising witchcraft. “The Devil does not come unless he is invited. He only comes into our lives if we invite him and usually, it is through occultism, and this will give him the legal right to operate in your life,” the priest added.

In one case, he claimed, the parents had offered their child to Satan because of “certain beliefs”; diabolical attacks upon the entire family ensued, and it took months before they were finally released by means of exorcisms, Masses, other forms of prayer, and their conversion to and baptism in the Catholic Church.

Asked how best to avoid this vulnerability to demonic attack, Fr Ablong recommended people lead a prayerful life and receive the sacraments. Invocation of the Blessed Virgin Mary may also be very helpful; she is “the mortal enemy of Satan because she is... just a human being, but because of God’s grace, she is able to overcome the ways of Satan.”

In terms of the coronavirus pandemic, Fr Ablong urged people to continue to put their hope in God and not to despair. “Nothing happens by chance. God has a reason for this pandemic. That is why we have to go back to God,” citing as examples the increased importance of family life. *canadianinquirer.net*, 13 Oct 2020. For more recent exorcism news, see FT371:26-27.



EDINBURGH DEATH MYSTERY

The remains of London woman Saima Ahmed were found in the grounds of an Edinburgh mansion and a nearby golf course four months after she disappeared in August 2015. A post-mortem was unable to determine the cause of death. She had no links with the city and had never been there before. Her brother, Sadat Ahmed, has made a fresh appeal for information on the fifth anniversary of her death.

Ms Ahmed, 36, was reported missing from her Wembley home on 30 August 2015, but her remains were not discovered until 9 January 2016 at Gogar Mount House and Gogarburn golf course. Police confirmed that her death remains unexplained, and her brother told reporters that the family remain perplexed by the circumstances surrounding his sister’s death. “We still think about it. We still talk about it. We don’t understand,” he said. “Every time we try and go through it in our heads, it does not make any sense to us. There is so much that does not make sense to us.”

Ms Ahmed, a librarian, is thought to have taken a train from London to Edinburgh. Unconfirmed sightings of a woman matching her description were made at Portobello beach, near the Scottish capital. Det Supt Martin MacLean of Police

Scotland said the potential sightings occurred on the evening she was reported missing. Another possible sighting on the beach the next morning was made by a dog walker who spoke to a woman fitting her description. The woman had told him she had “wanted to see the beach” and that she had travelled up from London and was going back down later that same day.

According to her brother, Ms Ahmed was “very inquisitive”, and in an area she had never visited before he expects she would have spoken to someone. It was “so out of character” for his sister to travel to the Scottish capital on her own, and he believes she must have had contact with someone else in order to get to the place where she was found. Police say CCTV evidence proved she had travelled alone and was not thought to have met anyone.

In 2016, two Metropolitan Police officers were charged with gross misconduct and three more with misconduct over the way they had handled information and conducted the investigation. The following year, a Met acting detective chief inspector was also charged with misconduct, the Independent Police Complaints Commission having found inconsistencies and omissions in the recording of information. *BBC News*; *Edinburgh News*, 28 Aug 2020.



TOP: CCTV of Ms Ahmed at Wembley Central station on the day she disappeared. ABOVE: Gogar Mount House, Edinburgh, where Ms Ahmed’s remains were found.

SIDELINES...

PISTACHIO PUPPY

Italian farmer Cristian Mallocci got a surprise when his dog, Spelacchia, gave birth to a puppy with green fur, immediately named Pistachio. The puppy was part of a five-dog litter born at Mallocci’s farm in Sardinia. Pistachio’s brothers and sisters all had white fur, the same colour as their mother. Dogs born with green fur are very rare, and are believed to result from the puppy making contact with a green pigment called biliverdin while in the womb. For other green pups, see FT42:18 and 318:8. *BBC News*, 22 Oct 2020.

DEAD CANDIDATE

A Republican candidate in November’s US presidential contest has been elected to the State House despite being dead. North Dakota businessman and rancher, David Andahl, 55, won the race for North Dakota’s Eight District with 35.53 per cent of the total vote. He died one month earlier on 5 October after a battle with Covid-19. *edition.cnn.com*, 4 Nov 2020.

HITLER ELECTED

A politician named after Adolf Hitler has won an election in Namibia, the former German colony in Africa, which still has a small German-speaking population. Adolf Hitler Unonona, who received 85 per cent of the votes in a regional poll, has promised not to seek world domination. He explained that his father had named him Hitler without realising the name’s negative connotations. *D.Mail*, 3 Dec 2020.

WHISKEY GALORE

A couple found over 66 bottles of Prohibition-era whiskey hidden in the walls of their 100-year-old home in Ames, New York State. They had been told the house was built in 1915 by Count Adolph Humpfner, a notorious bootlegger, but had thought this merely a local legend. The bottles, wrapped in tissue paper and straw, contain a brand of Scotch labelled Old Smuggler Gaelic Whiskey, still made today. Nick Drummond and Patrick Bakker say they will keep one of the bottles for a taste test. *cnn.com*, 26 Nov 2020.



SIDELINES...

BARKING ALBINO

Suriya Sangpong, 58, director of Thailand's zoos, travelled from Bangkok to Songkhla Zoo after the government ordered an inquiry into the disappearance of an albino barking deer, rejecting the zoo's explanation that a python had eaten it. On arrival, he was shot dead by Phuvadol Suwanna, a vet who had been ordered to transfer to another position while the investigation was under way. An hour later, the vet took his own life. *Sunday Telegraph*, 4 Oct 2020.

ROLLERBLADING PANDA

Police wish to identify a man spotted rollerblading on the Columbus freeway in Ohio while wearing nothing but a novelty plush panda head. The miscreant was caught on camera whizzing along at high speed and brandishing a golf club. "Pedestrians are not permitted on interstate highways," said a spokesman for Ohio's Department of Transportation. "There are signs posted at all the entrance ramps. This is a safety issue." *nypost.com*, 18 Dec 2020.

ZOMBIE SWEETS

Police in the northeast of England have warned parents to be on the lookout for a suspect confectionery called 'Zombie Sweets', which are thought to contain cannabis or a similar substance concealed in sealed packets and with wrappers looking much like any other sweet. Cleveland constabulary have warned that they could be "potentially dangerous" if consumed. *BBC News*, 22 Nov 2020.



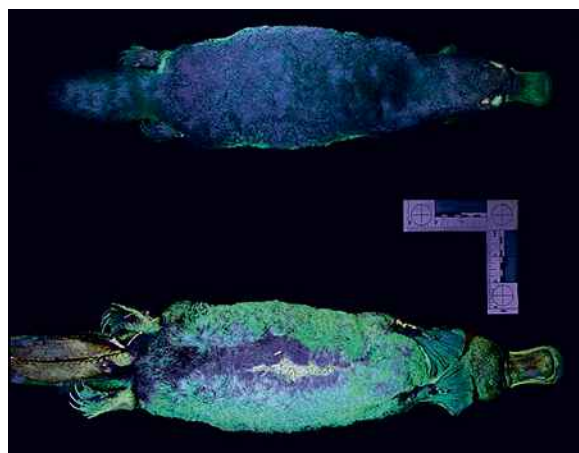
MARTIN ROSS

ANIMAL ODDITIES

Marsupials glow in the dark and a greedy dormouse gets stuck



HAMPSHIRE DORMOUSE GROUP



MAMMALIA 2020

TOP: The snoozing dormouse trapped in a bird feeder. **ABOVE:** Wombats and platypuses glow blue or green under UV light

DROWSY DORMOUSE

An Isle of Wight homeowner was surprised to discover a sleeping dormouse inside one of his garden birdfeeders. The hazel dormouse had crawled into the birdfeeder attracted by the seed mix inside, where it gorged itself until it became too fat to exit and promptly fell asleep.

The homeowner contacted Hampshire Dormouse Group (HDG) who advised him to ease it out and release it into a hedgerow. It is thought the usually nocturnal mammal may have climbed into the feeder overnight before being spotted

dozing the next day. Birds had continued to use the feeder, despite its somnolescent squatter.

The Isle of Wight is known to be one of few places in England where the endangered hazel dormouse can thrive, partly because of the number of hedgerows, and partly because of a lack of grey squirrels, which compete for food.

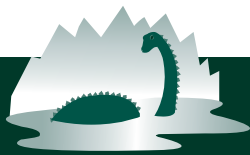
The homeowner said that upon release, the dormouse had scuttled away, apparently unharmed by its confinement. "Everyone loves a chubby dormouse... it's quite unusual to see them during the day,"

said a spokeswoman for HDG.

"He was plumping up nicely for hibernation. Safe to say this fatty will survive hibernation just fine." *BBC News*, 19 Nov 2020.

GLOW IN THE DARK MARSUPIALS

Researchers have discovered that many of Australia's mammals glow in the dark. The fur of marsupials, including bilbies, bandicoots, wombats, flying foxes, microbats and Tasmanian devils and monotremes (platypus and echidna) is fluorescent when subjected to UV light. *Guardian*, 18 Dec 2020.



KARL SHUKER on how environmental genetic samples can aid the search for mystery animals

CRYING OUT FOR DISCOVERY?

What may be an entirely new species of ziphiid or beaked whale has been discovered off Mexico, as suggested by certain unique morphological features and echolocation acoustics. Three living specimens of the unfamiliar whale form have been photographed, videoed, and aurally recorded using a hydrophone (underwater microphone), after they were encountered approximately 100 miles (160km) north of Mexico's remote trio of San Benito Islands on 17 November 2020 by a scientific expedition led by Dr Jay Barlow from the Scripps Institution of Oceanography in San Diego, southern California, while aboard the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society's *Martin Sheen* research vessel. The echolocation signals that they emit for hunting and navigation do not match those of any previously documented species of beaked whale, and their pair of large tusk-like teeth that characterise many such whales is located in a different position within their jaws from that of other tusked beaked whales.

Interestingly, the discovery of these three dark grey, medium-sized whales, each estimated to weigh approximately 1 tonne (i.e. comparable in weight to a large horse), occurred by accident. The purpose of the expedition had been to seek a scientifically recognised but still scarcely known ziphiid species called Perrin's beaked whale (*Mesoplodon perrini*), itself formally described as recently as 2002 and never knowingly sighted alive by scientists, which the expedition suspected might be responsible for a mysterious, unidentified acoustic signal dubbed BW83 that had been recorded in the vicinity of the San Benito Islands back in 2018. However, the three whales encountered were not Perrin's beaked whales, nor, seemingly, as noted above, any other known species either, and their signals did not match BW83 or those of any known species. So

now the scientific team is analysing environmental genetic samples obtained at the time of its very intriguing cetacean sighting, in a bid to uncover the precise taxonomic identity of this tantalising trio. <https://seashepherd.org/>; www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-9034471/Scientists-say-theyve-previously-unknown-whale-species-big-horse.html.

TASSIE & THE GENE MACHINE

EnviroDNA is an Australian company dedicated to the research and application of eDNA (environmental DNA), i.e. DNA traces left by all living organisms in their surrounding environment (such as soil, water, and air) via skin cells, hair, bodily secretions, faeces, etc, which in turn constitute a genetic profile or 'fingerprint' of each such organism. By analysing samples of eDNA from a given area and comparing them with archived DNA from known species, it can be determined which species exist in that area. By developing innovative technology in this specialist field, EnviroDNA has become a famous, established name in the monitoring of endangered and invasive species, as well as in biodiversity assessments. Recently, moreover, it has attracted widespread media interest due to the application of its technology to the investigation of whether a certain highly distinctive mammalian species – whose last confirmed specimen died in 1936 but which has been the subject of countless unconfirmed sightings since then – really does still survive.

The species in question is the thylacine *Thylacinus cynocephalus* (aka Tasmanian wolf and Tasmanian tiger, or Tassie for short). If it is still extant, this superficially canine marsupial, handsomely marked with a series of dorsal stripes, would be the world's largest living carnivorous pouched mammal, and for over 80 years has been sought by numerous individuals. These include longstanding Tassie



seeker Michael Moss, who approached EnviroDNA with the idea of using its genetic know-how to determine whether any modern-day thylacine eDNA is present in its native environment. If such DNA were to be found, this would constitute significant evidence in support of this species' continuing, albeit highly elusive, persistence. To create a specific DNA probe for thylacine eDNA searches, EnviroDNA used genetic data provided by the University of Melbourne, where researchers had lately mapped out this species' entire genome.

The probe was then put to the test, using a thylacine hair sample that Moss had obtained from a museum specimen – and sure enough, the team at EnviroDNA was successful in obtaining a positive signal from DNA extracted from that sample using the probe in the laboratory. The probe could indeed detect thylacine DNA, so now we await the next, very exciting stage – using it to seek and identify thylacine DNA in the wild, which Moss hopes will take place once the probe has been tested in the field. So will a subtle, indirect search using a veritable gene machine finally succeed where innumerable direct searches by human investigators have failed – and procure unequivocal evidence of present-day thylacine survival? And could this same technique do the same for other officially extinct but unofficially still-extant species? North America's ivory-billed woodpecker is one such example that readily comes to mind. Cryptozoology may have a major new tool at its disposal for potentially resurrecting a plethora of lost species, should they truly still exist. www.envirodna.com/news/searching-for-tasmanian-tiger-dna; mysteriousuniverse.org/2020/11/new-dna-test-may-help-find-a-living-tasmanian-tiger/.



TOP RIGHT: A preserved thylacine specimen. ABOVE: A newly discovered species of beaked whale?

TORSTEN BLACKWOOD / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES



PAUL SIEVEKING surveys some unusual finds, from an ancient sword to some vitrified brain tissue

MAYAN KNOW-HOW

The water filtration system in the Maya city of Tikal is the earliest known of its kind. Researchers recently discovered a volcanic mineral that captures microbes and heavy metals in one of Tikal's largest reservoirs. Because the material is not found nearby, the find suggests the presence of a deliberate filter.

Nestled in the tropical forests of northern Guatemala, Tikal flourished for more than 1,000 years. At the height of its prosperity, around AD 700, the population is thought to have been more than 45,000. Tikal's people had to contend with a dry season lasting roughly from November to April. Storing water in reservoirs was a solution, but it had to be fit to drink.

A few years ago, geoarchaeologist Nicholas Dunning and his colleagues from the University of Cincinnati excavated sediments from several of Tikal's reservoirs. They were surprised to find that one of the largest reservoirs, Corriental, had significantly less contamination than the others from heavy metals, toxin-producing algæ, and a mineral associated with faecal pollution; the Maya used to defecate in gardens, so the water coming into the reservoir would not have been clean. The sediments at the bottom of the reservoir were examined. The first hint of an ancient filter was the discovery of quartz crystals. There were four distinct layers, each a few centimetres thick, of brownish, millimetre-scale crystals. (Such sand-size grains can be used for filtering water, but they don't capture all harmful microbes.) Closer inspection showed the quartz was dotted with even smaller crystals of zeolites, a crystalline compound consisting of silicon and aluminium. This type of volcanic mineral can purify water by trapping both microbes and heavy metals within a porous structure.



ABOVE: Temples rise above the rainforest at the ancient Maya city of Tikal. BELOW: A vitrified segment of brain tissue from a young man who died in the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD 79: a neuron and axons are visible.

Both quartz and zeolite crystals are used in modern water filtration. The filters would have removed harmful microbes, nitrogen-rich compounds, heavy metals such as mercury and other toxins. Presumably, the Maya didn't know about the zeolites in rock, but they would have recognised their purifying capabilities. The researchers traced the zeolite and quartz to steep ridges around the Bajo de Azúcar about 18 miles (30km) northeast of Tikal. The Maya created this water filtration system nearly 2,000 years before similar systems were used in Europe, making it one of the oldest water treatment systems of its kind in the world.

There's no direct evidence of what Corriental's filtration system looked like; but woven reed matting may have held quartz- and zeolite-containing rocks underwater just upstream of the reservoir's inflow. Such a setup would have been periodically swept away by flash floods following a storm, which would explain the layers of quartz

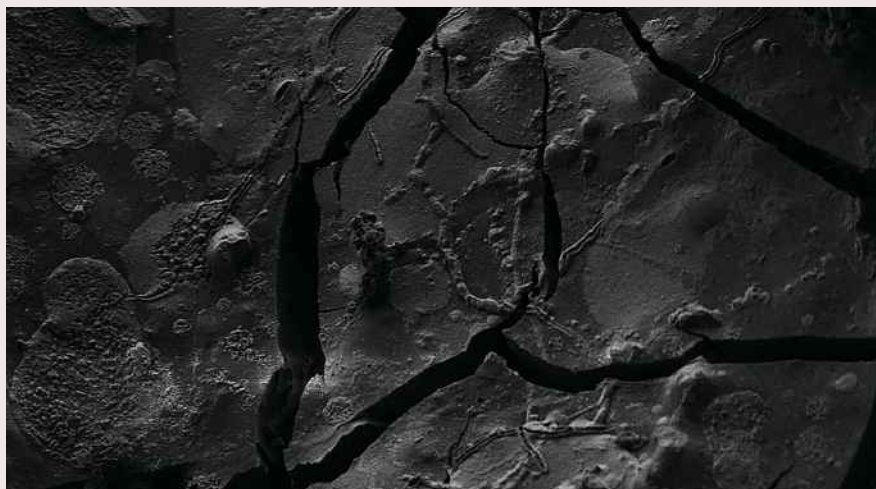
and zeolite found at the reservoir's base.

"A lot of people look at Native Americans in the Western Hemisphere as not having the same engineering or technological muscle of places like Greece, Rome, India or China," said Kenneth Barnett Tankersley, associate professor of anthropology and lead author of the study. "But when it comes to water management, the Maya were millennia ahead." *eurekalert.org*, 22 Oct; *sciencemag.org*, 5 Nov 2020.

TURNED TO GLASS

Preserved brain cells have been found in the remains of a 20-year-old man who died in the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD 79 and was found lying face-down on a bed in Herculaneum's Collegium Augustalium, or the College of the Augustales. This building, near Herculaneum's main street, was the headquarters of the cult of the Emperor Augustus. The cells' structure is still visible in a black, glassy material found in the man's cracked and charred skull, which is part of his brain. The transformation to glass occurred as a result of extreme heating to 932°F (500°C) and rapid cooling. The pyroclastic flow simultaneously destroyed and buried the town, rapidly heating organic materials. The rapid burial meant that even though materials like wood and flesh were carbonised, they were also preserved as they were in the moments after being suddenly heated.

Finding preserved brain tissue is rare in archaeology. But on occasion, brain tissue can survive for hundreds or thousands of years. For example, one 2,600-year-old skull found in a pit in northern England contains the shrunken remains of a brain with some proteins still intact. Acidic chemicals from the surrounding clay may have halted





ABOVE: The 5,000-year-old Anatolian sword found in the unlikely setting of an Armenian monastery on an island in the Venetian lagoon.

decomposition in that case. Mammoth brains have also been found preserved in permafrost, thanks to extreme cold temperatures. *livescience.com*, 2 Oct 2020.

SWORD SURPRISE

One of the oldest Anatolian weapons in the world has been discovered in a display cabinet at the Armenian monastery on the Saint Lazarus Island in the Venetian lagoon. When Vittoria Dall'Armellina of the Ca' Foscari University of Venice observed that the sword, mislabelled as mediæval, resembled those found in the Royal Palace of Arslantepe in eastern Anatolia, scientific analysis dated it to around 3000 BC, making it one of the oldest in the world. This type of sword was common in a relatively small region in eastern Anatolia, between the high course of the Euphrates and the southern shore of the Black Sea. In contrast to some of the Arslantepe specimens, it is not decorated: there are no visible inscriptions, embellishments or distinctive features. It might have been part of a looted burial whose grave goods were dispersed via the black market. *heritagedaily.com*, 28 Feb 2020.

FROM SACRED TO SUPPER

"The Britons consider it contrary to divine law to eat the hare, the chicken or the goose," according to Julius Cæsar in *De Bello Gallico*. "They raise these, however, for their own amusement or pleasure." Radiocarbon analysis of hare and chicken skeletons from a number of sites in Hampshire and Herefordshire indicates that the two species were introduced simultaneously to Britain between the fifth and third centuries BC. Excavation has previously revealed the animals had been carefully buried without being butchered.

Prof Naomi Sykes from the University of Exeter, who is leading the research, said: "Easter is an important British festival, yet none of its iconic elements are native to Britain... Historical accounts have suggested chickens and hares were too special to be eaten and were instead associated with deities – chickens with an Iron Age god akin to Roman Mercury, and hares with

an unknown female hare goddess. The religious association of hares and chickens endured throughout the Roman period. However, archæological evidence shows that as their populations increased, they were increasingly eaten, and hares were even farmed as livestock. Rather than being buried as individuals, hare and chicken remains were then disposed of as food waste."

The cross-disciplinary academic team from the universities of Exeter, Leicester and Oxford has previously revealed that the first rabbits were introduced to Britain not by the Normans, as was previously thought, but by the Romans in the first century AD (see 'Roman rabbit run' **FT200:18**). Hares and chickens were both farmed for food during the Roman occupation, but in the economic collapse following the Roman withdrawal around AD 410, rabbits became locally extinct and the populations of chickens and brown hares crashed. Historical and archæological evidence show rabbits were reintroduced to Britain as an elite food by the Normans in the 11th century. Rabbits were increasingly common in the 19th century, probably contributing to their replacement of the hare as the Easter bunny when the festival's traditions were reinvigorated by the Victorians. *Guardian*, *D.Telegraph*, 10 April 2020.

THE 'SIX-HEADED CHIEF'

A strange grave found in Scotland holding the mediæval remains of what was thought to be a single man surrounded by five skulls – dubbed the "Six-Headed Chief" – is starting to divulge its secrets. A new DNA analysis suggests the bones and skulls belong to members of the same extended family. After the burial was discovered in 1997 near the altar of a former parish church at Portmahomack, a fishing village in the Easter Ross region, archæologists soon realised two people had been buried in the same grave and surrounded by four disembodied skulls. The latest research reveals the two men were buried between the late 13th and early 15th centuries, and were cousins or an uncle and nephew; and three of the four skulls came from the same family – the

grandfather, father and mother of the second man. Another relative, probably the son of the second man, was buried nearby. The fourth skull dated from between the eighth and 10th centuries, and was originally buried in a nearby monastic cemetery. The skull is thought to belong to a Pictish monk, removed from the monastic cemetery and kept as a prized family relic.

The man first buried in the grave was almost certainly killed by a blow that cut away part of his face. "The attacker would have been facing the victim and delivered the fatal blow across the right side of the face with a sword large and sharp enough (such as a broadsword) to cut through the facial bones," said osteologist Shirley Curtis-Summers of the University of Bradford. The man would have stood at 5ft 9in (175cm) – the tallest of all the ancient skeletons excavated at Portmahomack – and his burial in the centre of the parish church suggested he was someone of great importance. Archæologists initially thought the remains dated from the 1480s, when the church was the scene of fighting between two Highland clans, the Rosses and the Mackays. Several raiders from Clan Mackay had been killed by warriors from Clan Ross, and the rest took refuge in the church; but the Rosses set fire to it, killing everyone inside – a conflict known as the Battle of Tarbat, from the name of the local parish. However, radiocarbon dating shows the people in the grave were buried several generations before the Battle of Tarbat, although it's possible they had family connections to people involved in the later battle. The church was rebuilt after the fire in the 1480s.

The "six-headed chief" may have been a local leader who died a violent death. In this case, the burial of the second man in the same spot, up to a generation later, was possibly an attempt to enhance the connections of his family with the first man. That might also explain why the skulls of the second man's ancestors were also put into the grave – a decision probably made by the second man before his death. The strange style of burial might have been an indication that the family was locally important. *livescience.com*, 28 Oct 2020.



CLASSICAL CORNER

FORTEANA FROM THE ANCIENT WORLD COMPILED BY BARRY BALDWIN

255: WONDERS WILL NEVER CEASE

“They say there’s seven wonders in the world
But what they say is out of date
There’s no more seven wonders in the world
I just met number eight” – ‘Venus in Blue Jeans’

Although the ‘23 Enigma’ (term supposedly coined by William Burroughs; see FT23:32-35) still dominates mystic numerology, seven is a good runner-up in the ubiquity stakes.

On the modern side, we have Randy Houser’s ‘Song Number Seven’ which “took me all the way to heaven”; ‘The Seven Year Itch’ (Marilyn Monroe); Bond’s 007 label; *et plurima alia...*

From antiquity and beyond (in each direction), God created the Seven Day Week (490 other digital biblical references), and by extension the Seven Deadly Sins. Classical items include the seven kings and hills of Rome, the seven against Thebes (Æschylus play, ancestor of ‘The Magnificent Seven’) – *et hoc genus omne...*

Then, the two big ones: The Seven Wise Men of Greece and The Seven Wonders of the World. Some later onomastic mutations, but both remained largely stable.

All seven sages were Greek, so clearly a Hellene devised this list, perhaps Plato who (*Protagoras*, paras 342c-343b) enumerates them, albeit some modern commentators see his register as mocking their credentials. Six of the seven (philosopher-scientist Thales the exception) were politicians: how many of ours would deserve a place?

The wondrous septet comprises: Great Pyramid of Giza; Hanging Gardens of Babylon; Temple of Artemis at Ephesus; Statue of Zeus at Olympia; Mausoleum at Halicarnassus; Colossus of Rhodes; Lighthouse at Alexandria. Only the first survives. Five were the works of Greeks, with Egyptian, Lydian, and Persian assistances. Most striking by its absence is the Parthenon. Equally so the Colosseum; indeed, no Roman or Italian building whatsoever.

Who created this list? Obviously not a Roman. Wikipedia misleadingly suggests Herodotus as pioneer. Three of the Seven post-date him, and he was contemptuous of the Great Pyramid, as would be such Roman writers as Pliny and Frontinus. Herodotus did praise individual buildings, but was no list-maker.

Poet-Librarian (think Philip Larkin) Callimachus certainly was, but his efforts concentrated on producing the first-ever library catalogue, at Alexandria. His other



lists have been thought to include the Wonders, without warrant.

Diodorus Siculus (1st-century BC) talks in general terms of the Seven Wonders, but no specifics, except the marvellous buildings and gardens of Queen Semiramis.

An epigram by Antipater of Sidon (c. 100 BC) in the *Greek Anthology* (bk9 no58) claims to have seen all seven, albeit substituting the Walls of Babylon for the Lighthouse. Another epigram (bk8 no177, anonymous) does the same.

A prose treatise attributed to Philo of Byzantium has the same listing, saying in his Introduction that: “The seven wonders are known to everyone by repute, but few have seen them all,” going on with travel instructions emphasising how long

LEFT: The Colossus of Rhodes. BELOW: The Lighthouse at Alexandria in an early 19th century engraving.

a complete tour would take. An English translation by Jean Blackwood is appended to Michael Ashley’s *The Seven Wonders of the World* (1980).

But, which Philo of Byzantium? Some say the third century BC one. Others choose a homonym from the fourth-fifth centuries AD. The former was notable for other lists, and came at a time when the last three Wonders were relatively hot news. The latter, though, may herald considerable Byzantine poetic interest in the subject.

Here we have various poetic mutations (usually in the *Greek Anthology*) in which the traditional Wonders are interspersed with or dropped in favour of modern buildings such as imperial palaces. Gregory Nazianzenus from his Christian perspective dismisses them in a single contemptuous line, putting a tomb above them. For all the details, see my discussion in *L’Antiquité classique* 52 (1983), 255-9.

These have in turn given rise to countless modern lists of Wonders, some blending old with new, others strictly modern. FT readers will be drawn to that compiled by the Charles Fort Institute, under Gordon Rutter’s ægis; cf. FT234:58-59 – illustrated list online.

I covered most aspects of the Great Pyramid (NB: Greek and Roman texts generally use the plural) in FT158:19. Just a few Addenda. Younger readers may not know that 1955 cinematic rhubarb



Land of the Pharaohs, with Jack Hawkins as Pharaoh Cheops and as his scheming queen a young Joan Collins. It is now not a thing of beauty. I visited it in 1963, mainly struck by its mustiness and bat population. Missing is the original shiny casing adorned with hieroglyphics. Herodotus was told by his dragoman guides they listed the leeks, onions, and radishes provided by the Pharaoh for his workers. This has been modernly much ridiculed, but it seems plausible that Cheops would publicly boast of his benefices. Nowadays, there are periodic newspaper reports of secret chambers being discovered within (see e.g. **FT361:16**). Plausible notion, to baffle the ever-ready Egyptian tomb-robbers, but nothing so far...

In 1915 (Jim Steinmeyer's biography, 2008, p48-9), Theodore Dreiser asked Fort for some film script ideas. The following was submitted:

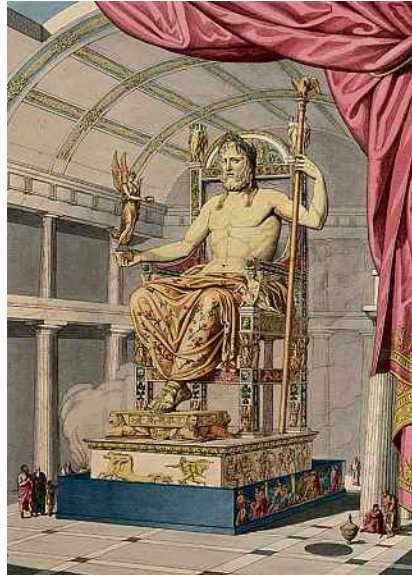
"The film would cut between odd discussions, layers of salt inside the chambers of the pyramids, walls on the planet Mars... a battle near the pyramids... battle can't begin. Here and there ranks are deserted, strange call of the pyramids... soldiers are climbing them, they don't know why... at last mankind has learned what it is for... CURTAIN.

This (alas) came to nothing. But it does prefigure the *Doctor Who* story 'Pyramids of Mars'.

"In the hanging gardens please don't speak.

In the hanging gardens no one sleeps" – The Cure

Babylon's hanging gardens remain a mystery. Herodotus doesn't mention them, instead extolling its walls; some later writers do likewise. No extant Babylonian testimony. Nor any archaeological evidence. However, it is uncertain if Herodotus ever



went to Babylon. Five intelligent later writers (Diodorus, Strabo, Curtius Rufus, Josephus, Philo) describe them in glowing detail. One modern theory is that there was confusion with those built by Assyrian King Sennacherib (704-681 BC). For full theoretical conspectus, see Stephanie Dalley's *The Mystery of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon: An Elusive World Wonder Traced* (2013).

Coda: Saddam Hussein wasted much time and money trying to re-create them along with the Palace of Nebuchadnezzar.

The Ephesian Temple of Artemis was deemed the best Wonder in Antipater's poem. It was burned down in 356 BC by Herostratus, who hoped this arson would give him immortality; cf. Mark Chapman's motive for murdering John Lennon.

Carved by famous sculptor Phidias (435 BC), the Statue of Zeus at Olympia was destroyed in (probably) the fifth century

AD – circumstances unknown. Caligula had ordered it removed to Rome, but when the workmen approached, it burst out laughing, an omen of his impending assassination.

The Mausoleum (353–51 BC) survives only as an English word. A kind of reverse Taj Mahal, it was built by Queen Artemisia for her deceased husband Mausolus. Destroyed by successive earthquakes, modern attempts at excavation have yielded only fragments of the base.

Completed in 280 BC to celebrate a military victory, the Colossus of Rhodes – roughly the height of the Statue of Liberty – was destroyed by earthquake in 226 BC. Contrary to popular belief, it did not bestride the harbour, a fiction helped by Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar* 1.2.136-8. There are frequent reports of modern grandiose rebuilding plans. For a cinematic belly laugh, see Sergio Leone's pre-oater *The Colossus of Rhodes* (1961), featuring Rory Calhoun.

Ironic that the Pharos (Lighthouse) at Alexandria, the only useful septet member, is the worst served by ancient listers, being often omitted or substituted. Built circa 280 BC, lauded by Julius Caesar, it succumbed thrice to earthquakes, finally (1400) to human vandalism. Some remains were discovered (1968, 1994) by marine archaeologists, with further ones confirmed by satellite imaging.

One reason for Byzantine poetic neglect – there are just a couple in the *Greek Anthology* (9.160, 9.674) – may be that interest had now been redirected to the lights in the dome of Justinian's new Hagia Sophia, bright enough to guide their sailors to harbour.

Now, go to lyrics.com where are listed, with YouTube links, 10,695 lyrics, 100 artists, and 100 albums all containing a very mixed bag of 'The Seven Wonders of the World'.



TOP: The Statue of Zeus at Olympia. ABOVE: Semiramis relaxing in the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, in a *fin de siècle* painting by the Austrian artist H Waldeck.



Ghosts of the Hyperloop

DAVID HAMBLING books his ticket for a trip back in time on London's pneumatic railway

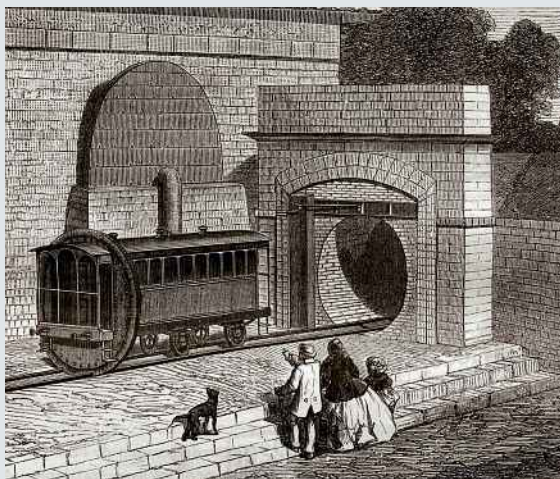
A futuristic concept in transportation speeds towards reality, as a Hyperloop railway carries its first passengers along a short test track in Nevada. This is a small-scale demonstration of a system that could send transport pods whipping between cities through underground vacuum tubes at 1,000km/h (620mph). The multibillion-dollar scheme is ambitious, but, given Elon Musk's recent success in ferrying passengers to the International Space Station, who can doubt his ability to build a railway? Perhaps though he should take warning from the Victorian ghosts of an earlier vacuum railway.

In 1864 brave passengers paid sixpence each to experience the future of travel, in an experimental vacuum-powered underground railway in Crystal Palace Park. It ran through a 500m (1,640ft) tunnel, almost exactly the same length as the modern Hyperloop test track in Nevada.

Pneumatic transport was having a moment in Victorian London. A year earlier, in 1863, the General Post Office opened its first underground pneumatic railway, carrying post between the District Post Office in Eversholt Street and Euston station. A combination of air pressure from behind and vacuum in front propelled the single wheeled capsule, and made the 450m (1,476ft) journey in just over three minutes. The capsule carried 35 mail bags and made 13 round trips a day, saving the considerable trouble of getting the mailbags through London's crowded streets. The Post Office later extended their pneumatic railway to St Martin's-Le-Grand in 1865. The extension line was opened by the Duke of Buckingham, who lay down in the mail capsule to make the journey. "The sensation of starting, and still more of arriving, were not agreeable," noted one of the Duke's companions who also made the journey.

The first passenger underground in the world had also opened in London in 1863, the Metropolitan Line between Paddington and Farringdon Street. Trains were packed and the potential for underground railways in the increasingly urban, industrialised century was obvious. The underground railway's weakness was the need for steam engines, which filled the tunnels and platforms with steam, smoke and soot.

Some inventors toyed with railways hauled by cables, with engines located at the stations, or even powered by windmills.



LEFT: The entrance to the Crystal Palace pneumatic railway in 1864.

However, electricity was already starting to eclipse pneumatic propulsion. Electric trains proved more practical than either steam or pneumatic ones, and soon became the standard for the London underground and subsequent urban metros. (The GPO did go on to install a network of small pneumatic tubes for sending message capsules around London, as did others including department stores like Harrods.)

But what exactly happened to the Crystal Palace railway remains a mystery. It only ran between August

Sir Joseph Paxton, who had built the Crystal Palace, proposed a pneumatic line that he termed the Great Victoria Way, which, he said "would make London the grandest city in the world."

The experimental railway at Crystal Palace was the prototype for air-powered London transport. The first section was to have connected Waterloo station with Great Scotland Yard, passing under the Thames. The tunnel was 5m (16ft) in diameter and lined with brick. It took a curving path, and went up a one-in-15 gradient, connecting the park's two stations, the Low Level and the High Level. The single coach seated 30 people and had a sliding door at each end. A huge stationary fan driven by a steam engine blew the train in one direction and sucked it in the other, at speeds of up to 40km/h (25mph). The great challenge with this type of propulsion was maintaining an airtight fitting. The train had a collar of bristles, and leather fittings sealed with wax covered the entrances and fan housing.

Starting and stopping were more comfortable than the mail train. A correspondent from the *Times* described it as "much steadier and pleasanter than ordinary railway travelling" and expressed the view that "the chief obstacles encountered in practically working the atmospheric railway, introduced some 15 years ago, are considered to have been effectively overcome." The correspondent noted that the vacuum railway removed any risk of two trains colliding – such accidents were horrifyingly common at the time – but suggested that means might be needed to prevent the engine producing too much suction and bursting passengers like frogs in a vacuum pump.

and October 1864 and the reason for its early closure was never given. Many blame it on rats. Both the leather parts and the waxy sealant, made from animal fat, may have attracted rodents, and chewing through them would have ruined the airtight seals. There were certainly plenty of rats about. When the Crystal Palace burned down in 1936, waves of thousands of them were seen running from the fire. Even today, bold rats scavenge in daylight alongside squirrels in Crystal Palace Park.

The Crystal Palace tunnel was filled in and, strangely enough, its exact location was lost, though the site is supposedly haunted. All the equipment seems to have disappeared. Some suggest there is a sinister reason for this.

In 1978 a woman claimed to have not just found the tunnel but a passenger coach still in it, filled with skeletons in full Victorian costume. The suggestion is that the railway operators covered up a fatal, perhaps vacuum-related, accident, literally burying not just the story, but also all the evidence including the entire test track, leaving only ghosts to tell the tale. This Victorian conspiracy theory is the basis for Tom Brown's 2014 novel, *Strange Air*.

The modern Hyperloop travels through a vacuum tube to reach higher speeds than other trains, with electricity providing the motive power. Like its predecessor, it looks promising in theory, but expensive to put into practice. It also faces a challenge from alternative technology, in this case electric-powered passenger-carrying drones. Hopefully this time there is no risk of the Hyperloop being brought to a halt by a plague of hungry rats... nor a catastrophic accident and a cover-up in the desert.



NOWT SO QUEER | More from the annals of strange behaviour: delusions of zombies and aliens, a phantom crapper, and a Michigan family's porn wars



ABOVE LEFT: Paul and Beth Werking did not approve of their son's porn collection. ABOVE RIGHT: CCTV footage of the Bristol attacker.

THEY F**K YOU UP, YOUR MUM AND DAD

A Michigan man has successfully sued his parents after they got rid of his pornography collection. David Werking, 29, had been living at his parents' house in Grand Haven on the shores of Lake Michigan for 10 months following his divorce. He later moved out to Muncie, Indiana, but later discovered that his parents had thrown out his porn films and magazines, which were worth \$29,000. US district judge Paul Maloney ruled that Mr Werking's parents had no right to throw out the collection, saying: "There is no question that the destroyed property was David's property," and that the "defendants repeatedly admitted that they destroyed [it]." Mr Werking's parents had argued they had a right to act as his landlords, but this defence was not upheld on the basis that they had failed to cite any "statute or caselaw to support their assertion that landlords can destroy property that they dislike." Mr Werking may now seek damages from his parents as compensation for his loss. *Guardian*, 19 Dec 2020.

THE 'ZOMBIE DEFENCE'

A Canadian man who believed he was fleeing zombies stole a truck and a canoe and tried to paddle across Portage Inlet in Victoria, British Columbia, with his hands.

Brendan Marney was charged with theft of a motor vehicle, dangerous driving and theft of a canoe on 31 January 2019, the court hearing that he had been experiencing a severe psychotic episode at the time. He was first spotted walking on the railings of an overpass, at times with his eyes shut.

After being coaxed down by two passing drivers, he assured his rescuers he was not suicidal and that he was happy to be on the railing. They managed to persuade him to cross the road toward their cars, but when one of the drivers informed Marney she had called 911, he dashed toward her truck, got in, and sped away, missing a right-hand turn at an intersection before crashing into a light standard. Exiting the truck, he ran off down an embankment, where police later found him "paddling a canoe in circles with his hands" about 40ft (12m) from the shore. He was later taken to hospital.

Marney testified that in the days leading up to the episode, he had been experiencing a heightened awareness of the true nature of reality, realising that the entire world was a fake and a trap created by some unknown captors. He was afraid that these captors would turn him into a table and leave him to suffer an eternity of pain. He also believed he possessed the ability to change reality by closing his eyes.

Marney stated that he had become wary of all other people, believing them to be zombies. He also testified that he did not believe death was real, hence his seemingly fearless walking along the railing and the highway with eyes closed. Psychiatrist Dr Jason Coupland diagnosed a severe psychotic episode exacerbated by marijuana use. The judge agreed and found Marney to be not criminally responsible for his actions by reason of mental disorder. His case is now in the hands of the psychiatric review board. *timescolonist.com*, 6 Oct 2020.

ONE-ARMED ROLLERSKATE ATTACK

A man accused of stabbing passers-by as he roller-skated down a Bristol street told a psychiatrist he thought his family "were going to be killed by aliens", a court has heard. Benjamin Bridgeman, 38, who has schizophrenia, is accused of using a kitchen knife to injure three men during his rampage in the Knowle area in February 2020. He faces eight charges at Bristol Crown Court, including three of attempted murder.

The court heard that the defendant, who was born without his left arm, had a history of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder since he was 15 and had used cannabis and LSD to try to control

his social anxiety. He stopped using cannabis a week before the incident and told a psychiatrist the day before that he thought he "was going to be taken away to be sacrificed". He also believed "the world was split into good people and bad people in battle with each other". In addition to the three attempted murder charges, Mr Benjamin is also charged with possession of an offensive weapon, assault of an emergency worker and three counts of wounding with intent to cause grievous bodily harm. *BBC News*, 27 Aug 2020.

BROWN STUDY IN BRIGHTON

Brighton and Hove City Council's environmental enforcement officers are seeking a man who apparently defecated on a wall in the city centre after they examined an amateur video recording of the incident. The video shows a man wearing a purple shirt and a beige hat walking along the pavement past a row of houses at around 7am. He then places a can of drink on the ground before dropping his trousers and defecating on the wall, which is opposite residential properties.

A council spokesman said: "We have received details of someone we would like to speak to about this incident and our investigation is ongoing. We are aware that there are certain debilitating medical conditions such as Crohn's disease and colitis that can underpin instances such as this. We very much want to make sure we are not discriminating against people suffering from what are sometimes known as invisible disabilities. But we would always look to take appropriate enforcement action against clear cases of antisocial behaviour."

Spitting, urinating or defecating in public are all offences punishable by a £75 on-the-spot fine. An apology of sorts was later daubed on the wall, reading: "The shitter was not homeless. Sorry though." It had been written in brown pen. *theargus.co.uk*, 24 Sept 2020.



Unreal estate for sale

ALAN MURDIE takes a look at the ups and downs of the haunted property market

Moving to a new house can be a stressful event at any time, not least in the middle of a global pandemic. Add on the possibility of an active haunting in your new home and all kinds of issues arise.

The decision by the recently elected Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga to delay moving into his official residence, the *Sori Kotei* mansion in central Tokyo, has renewed the rumours of the building being haunted, which dogged his predecessor Shinzo Abe.

Suga took office as Japan's 99th prime minister on 16 September 2020. So far, he has refused to move to the *Sori Kotei* and stays instead at a building provided for Japan's House of Representatives. In this he is following the example of former prime minister Abe, who served two terms in office, 2006-2007 and 2012-19. During his second term, Abe also refused to live in the official residence, opting to make a 15-minute commute every day from his private home. He said the 11-room property was too big for his needs, but Japan's *Asahi Shimbun* daily newspaper reported Abe admitting the "presence of ghosts" had made him think twice about returning to the house. His political opponents duly mocked him for being afraid of ghosts, but speculation has now been renewed.

Abe cited hearing ghost stories from his predecessors, including former Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori who reportedly said he had seen the "leg of a haunted spirit"

in the grounds. Apparitions of men in uniform have also been reported to walk the grounds of the mansion. Visions or hallucinations of severed limbs and body parts do feature in apparition sightings over the years, including hands, arms and feet.

The *Sori Kotei* has a grim history and there are bullet holes in the glass above the main entrance, said to have been made when the residence was attacked during coup attempts in the 1930s. Prime Minister Inukai Tsuyoshi (1855-1932) was assassinated at the mansion on 15 May 1932 by 11 Japanese naval officers and army cadets attempting to provoke martial law. All received light sentences for the killing. In 1936 the mansion was occupied by renegade troops for four days when 1,400 rebels stormed Tokyo's government district, resulting in the death of several politicians.

Currently, Japan's Prime Minister has announced he has "no plans" for relocating despite official assurances of good security on site. It would be most interesting to talk to those responsible for security at the mansion who might be most likely to experience anything.

Sources: 'Prime minister turns down 'haunted' residence' [UPI] 15 Dec 2020; *The Atlantic*, 13 Aug 2013; *Int. Business Times*, 28 Sept 2013.

Meanwhile in Hampden, Baltimore, boldly telling prospective purchasers that a place is not haunted has been adopted

as a successful marketing gimmick. Real estate agent Joy Sushinsky, 40, has taken to placing black and white 'Not Haunted' signs outside hard-to-sell properties she is marketing. She claims her representations to prospective buyers, that they are completely ghost-free, are being well received and achieve sales. She says she first thought of the idea following a visit to New Orleans where she saw sale signs on properties in the French quarter which specified whether properties were haunted or not.

Playing up the ghostly and legendary reputation is a long-established promotional technique currently being tried by the new owners of the dilapidated Berengaria hotel in Cyprus (named after the wife of Richard the Lionheart), which has stood empty since 1984. The Limassol-based Prime Property Group who have purchased the building are using grim stories as part of a marketing campaign for restoring it and constructing luxury villas on surrounding land: stories of a former manager who committed suicide, a merchant's wife supposedly found dead in the swimming pool who "seeks revenge", a young woman dressed in white linen who appears at dusk leaning against one of the windows, and reports by local people of hearing screams and howls and the rustle of heavy velvet robes. (*Financial Mirror*, 9 Dec 2020.)

In contrast, Ms Sushinsky is asserting that her Baltimore properties are *not*



ABOVE: Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga is reluctant to move into his official residence, the *Sori Kotei* (right), which is said to be haunted.



ABOVE: The abandoned Berengaria Hotel in Prodomos. The first major hotel in Cyprus, the Berengaria was named in honour of Queen Berengaria, wife of Richard the Lionheart. It opened in 1931 and has stood empty since 1984. **BELOW:** Baltimore estate agent Joy Sushinsky with a portrait of Killer the cat.

haunted. She first deployed these signs four years ago and with the market in property slowing in 2020 she decided to repeat the exercise and post examples on the Internet “to make people smile after a difficult year”.

It is an area where one must tread carefully. The marketing, letting or selling of allegedly haunted houses has been a contentious one in a number of jurisdictions over the centuries. In the USA, the matter is approached on a state-by-state basis. The scope for legal action arising from property misdescription received a boost in 1991 with the decision regarding *Stambovsky v Ackley* [1991] 572 N.Y.S 2d 672, 676, 677 (New York Appellate Div Ct), where the Court permitted the plaintiff to withdraw from a contract of sale after discovering the seller had widely publicised a belief in the house being haunted. The Court acknowledged that it is both impossible to inspect for poltergeists and unreasonable for the prudent home-buyer to do so, the Court ruling: “There is no sound policy reason to deny the plaintiff relief for failing to discover a state of affairs which the most prudent purchaser would not be expected to even contemplate.” (See **FT59:5**, with photo.)

Ms Sushinsky reports that while not everyone is convinced by her assurances

“I knew it couldn’t be the cat making the noises, because he was in the bedroom with me”



that a house is not haunted, she has managed to sell several properties on the back of the campaign. It should be added that she is not a sceptic when it comes to homes being haunted, her opinions having shifted after experiences at her own home in Baltimore, previously empty and abandoned for eight years, which she moved into in spring 2020. “When I moved in weird things started happening,” she said. Her cat, named Killer, would make a strange ‘yowling’ noise when he walked past a certain corner of a room near the front of the house. He would stare at that corner for long passages of time, meowing. Her dog too seemed to ‘be aware’ of the apparent presence.

That this was more than a curious reaction on the part of her pets was demonstrated when Ms Sushinsky, who lives alone, heard the door across the hallway from her bedroom periodically opening and slamming by itself during the night. Confirming this was a physical phenomenon, she stated: “Every night I’d make sure it was locked, then wake up again and it would be open, having heard it open and close all night. It was freaky. I also knew it couldn’t be the cat making the noises in the middle of the night, because he was locked in the bedroom with me.”

Ms Sushinsky states that if she were



GHOSTWATCH

ever to sell her current home, she would definitely inform any potential buyers that it used to be haunted. Curiously, when Killer died suddenly in May, the bangs in the night that had so often startled her awake suddenly ceased. "There was no more opening or closing of doors all night long, it was the strangest thing," she said. "The coincidence of it all made me a believer. It's like Killer took the ghost with him." (Sources: *Baltimore Sun*, *Daily Mail*, 15 Dec 2020).

Indeed, this may be entirely coincidental, but associations between cats and ghosts are numerous. Ghost hunter Elliot O'Donnell (1872-1965) considered cats 'psychic barometers', though many of his own grim stories featuring phantom felines are highly suspect (e.g. 'The House of the Bloody Cat' and 'The Headless Cat' in *A Casebook of Ghosts*, 1969, edited by Harry Ludlam).

The cessation of haunting on the death of the cat brings to mind the archaic custom of concealing cats as foundation sacrifices within the walls and fabric of domestic buildings to deter evil spirits or vermin, and which was practised as recently as the 18th century. An earlier generation of folklorists proposed cats were immured in walls alive (shades of Edgar Allan Poe), but it is now considered that post-mortem burial was the usual practice. Nearly 20 years ago, folklorist Brian Hoggard estimated that there are some 100 examples on record, but around 10 times as many known anecdotally across England and Wales. (*Macclesfield Express*, 2 Oct 2002.) In November 2017 I saw an undocumented specimen preserved at an old house in Powys built in 1751, and in the Mill Hotel in Sudbury, Suffolk, you can see one publicly displayed, being afforded its own glass-topped grave in the reception area (see **FT363:74-76**). However, despite such preservations, any protection is quite illusory as hauntings occur in buildings regardless of any ritual deposits – the two kittens discovered a century apart at the Tower of London being an example (exhibits xviii.587 & xviii 897, Royal Armouries Collection – see [https://royalarmouries.org/stories/behind-the-](https://royalarmouries.org/stories/behind-the-scenes/cats-in-the-tower/)



LEFT: A blurry image of the 'ghost' that appeared in an Australian estate agent's photograph.

BELOW: The BBC's Zoe Ball, whose deceased cat, Monkey, has been heard miaowing around the house.

Speaking on her Radio 2 Breakfast Show, she said that her two-year-old pet cat 'Monkey', killed by a car on 11 December 2020, had subsequently

been heard miaowing by her son Woody. She paid a poignant tribute to the pet on her Instagram page, writing: "Our beautiful cat Monkey has gone to monkey heaven. He was a great adventurer, so chatty, full of love and always up for a fireside cuddle... Rest well you magic ginger bundle". However, she later told listeners that "Woody is obsessed his ghost is in the house as he can hear him miaowing. But I think it's all in his head." *Sun*, 22 Dec 2020.

Being haunted by one's pet is not unknown (e.g. 'Will your pet come back to haunt you?' *Daily Mail*, 10 Nov 2011) in the same way that many people report the apparitions or other post-mortem signs of their deceased spouses in their homes after bereavement. I remember the late Lancelot Railton, a respected senior civil servant and valued member of the Ghost Club, telling me of seeing the ghost of his family's pet cat in the kitchen of their riverside home at St Albans, Hertfordshire, the day after its peaceful death and noticing "it was faded around the edges". Writer Ronald Blythe also told me of seeing a ghostly cat at the home of poet James Turner and his wife (pers. comm. 15 June 2011) at their cottage in Borley in Essex in October 1949, also later seen by the Turners themselves.

Lest such sightings be dismissed as a conceit of sensitive cat lovers, persons disliking cats have reported spectral appearances. In February 1892, a Mrs Gordon Jones who confessed to having "the strongest aversion to cats" wrote to the SPR about how she would never tolerate the creatures until obliged to keep a grey and white one by the presence of mice in her family home. The cat, which she seldom looked at, apparently became mad and a request came from the servants to drown it. Mrs Jones consented, and this was duly done by the groom.

"Woody is obsessed that his ghost is in the house as he can hear him miaowing"



scenes/cats-in-the-tower/).

That the experience of a haunting may depend far more upon the individuals occupying a property than the place itself is suggested by a report of a ghost cat from British actress and broadcaster Zoe Ball.



"The same evening I was sitting alone in the dining-room," she wrote. "I am sure that I was not thinking of the cat or of possible apparitions. I was reading; presently I felt impelled to look up, the door seemed to open, and there stood the animal that had been drowned in the morning; the same cat, but apparently much thinner and dripping with water only the expression of the face was changed; the eyes were quite human and haunted me afterwards, they looked so sad and pathetic. I felt so sure of what I saw that at the moment I never doubted that it was the living cat who had escaped from drowning."

She summoned a servant to remove it ordering: "There's the cat, take it out and [...] it seemed to me that she could not but see it too, but was clear and distinct to my eyes as the table or chairs. But the servant looked frightened and said 'Oh, ma'am, I saw the cat after William had drowned it – and then he buried it in the garden.' 'But,' I said, 'there it is'. Of course, she saw nothing, and then the cat began to fade, and I saw nothing more of it." This incident occurred around 1889. Reading her letter, one gets the impression that Mrs Jones was more irritated by her experience than disturbed by it. (*Proceedings of the SPR* vol 10, 1894 p. 127). More widely, phantom cats have been reported at diverse haunted locations from Edinburgh Castle to Bodmin in Cornwall, where stories merge with cryptozoology and the much vaunted 'Beast of Bodmin'.

Concluding, Ms Sushinsky states that if she was ever to sell her current home, she will definitely inform any potential buyers

that it used to be haunted.

At the same time, stressful though house purchases may be, it is also important not to be too credulous, over-imaginative or just paranoid. Shortly before Christmas 2020 a photograph taken by a real estate agent of a recently sold property in Port Victoria, Australia, was circulated worldwide. It seemed to show a shape, interpreted by Tyler Thornton as an apparition. The photo had been sent out by the agent to celebrate the sale of the property, which had belonged to Mr Thornton's mother and late father. "She sent me the photos while I was on the phone to her and I said, 'Who is in the window?' She freaked out and hung up on me."

Regrettably, the image is so blurry it is impossible to say with any certainty what it is or might represent, but this did not prevent its circulation by Australia Paranormal, and the world's press, or flippant speculation on-line, such as: "He'll probably put a quiche in the oven, before he leaves..." (*D.Star, Sun, etc.*, 23 Dec 2020).

Faced with such a situation and possible liabilities, it might be better to state clearly whether a ghost haunts inside a property or externally. For example, the 'Headless Ghost of Dunmore House' is reasonably well-known in Kiama, Australia, and received a seasonal boost in a feature on haunted beaches carried by the *Mail Online (Australia)* on 23 December 2020. Yet closer examination reveals that it actually haunts the road outside the property.

One of the benefits of the virtual global village is the way one can now dip into

LEFT: One of the 'Not Haunted' signs placed outside hard-to-sell properties in Hampden, Baltimore, by Joy Sushinsky.

the intriguing national, international, and local news stories published worldwide, in the equivalents of the *Fishguard County Echo* or the *Wrexham Evening Telegraph* (admittedly an early advocate of the literary gifts of Jeffrey Archer). Here one may discover anomalous reports arising in distant places of which one has never previously heard and which one is unlikely ever to visit. Such jewels can now be picked up with relative ease and relayed to a global audience.

And thus it proves with this story, originally appearing in the *Illawarra Mercury*, a local paper in New South Wales and given greater prominence via the haunted beaches feature mentioned above.

This reveals the spectre to be a man decapitated in a traffic accident outside, a gruesome additional extra detail being that the severed head was placed on a gate of Dunmore House, north of the Minnamurra River. Even more remarkably, the *Illawarra Mercury* revealed details of a sighting by bus driver Barney Dion, late one night in the 1950s. This rare example of a modern headless ghost is mentioned in the Dion family history (*Bus Pioneers of Wollongong: A History of the Dion Brothers Bus Partnership*, 1997, by John Birchmeier) and confirmed by his nephew Les Dion (*Illawarra Mercury*, 26 July 2017). Barney saw a figure in the road, lacking a head and with its body wrapped in a sheet. He gave chase in his bus, but the ghost outpaced him before it "threw a rope up into the air and disappeared". (see <https://kiamalocalhistory.wordpress.com/2007/08/31/headless-ghost-of-dunmore-house/>) This spectre joins another local ghost, a phantom boat coming down Minnamurra river, appearing in the early morning mist every Boxing Day, an anniversary haunting arising from the drowning of seven people on 26 December 1893. Altogether, another case of better out than in, one might think, as in the Dunmore House case.

Of course, talk of a headless ghost and Boxing Day reminds one irresistibly of the apparition of a headless clown who was decapitated when he used piano wire to hang himself at a private house at Tenterden Bottoms, Kent, in the 18th century and who reportedly appears each 26 December. Just imagine trying to explain that one to any potential purchaser when the property next comes up for sale, whether during a pandemic or any other time of the year. (See *Our Haunted Kingdom*, 1973, by Andrew Green).

EXHIBITION REPORT

FANTASTIC BEASTS

MATT SALUSBURY finds zoological wonders at London's Natural History Museum

'Fantastic Beasts: The Wonder of Nature' at London's Natural History Museum (NHM) is a tie-in with "The Wizarding World" – the franchises of the JK Rowling *Harry Potter* books and films and the two *Fantastic Beasts* films (with more in production). It's a collaboration between NHM, Warner Bros and BBC Natural History Unit – its creators prefer to describe it as a "show" rather than an exhibition – and it cleverly combines the magic of The Wizarding World with the robust hard science of the NHM's huge collections.

Working out which of the beasts on display are made-up as part of the *Potter* or *Fantastic Beasts* franchises and which are real is a game you can play with the kids, ages eight and up. Just to make it more interesting, there are a couple of "genuine fakes" – like the hideous Buxton



Mermaid, on loan from Buxton Museum, and some narwhal tusks passed off as unicorn horns. The atmosphere is helped by the setting – the gallery has been made to resemble an old-school museum corridor, complete with 'historic showcases'.

Determined non-fans of the Wizarding World have nothing to fear, though. Newt Scamander – the main protagonist of the *Fantastic Beasts* films – is a "magi-zoologist", and there's plenty of overlap between this fantasy discipline and cryptozoology. Scamander's mission in the films is to protect endangered magical species, which fits neatly with the NHM's current conservation and climate change priorities.

There are only a dozen actual Rowling-franchise fantastic beast reconstructions on show, but for cryptozoology enthusiasts, whether Rowling fans or not, the exhibition is a treat – a once-in-a-lifetime cornucopia of cryptozoological artefacts, with 125 items in total.

There's Sir Richard Owen's sea serpent scrapbook, for starters. The great naturalist, who coined



TOP: A prop of a Hungarian Horntail dragon made for the *Fantastic Beasts* film series. ABOVE: Natural History Museum staff preparing exhibits to go on display.



the word “dinosaur”, was a sea serpent sceptic, leading Prince Albert to describe him as the ‘Sea Serpent Killer’. The scrapbook seems to be a ledger with accounts scrawled in it by hand that’s been re-used to paste sea serpent cuttings in. It’s displayed with a magnificent front-page illustration of a whiskery sea monster allegedly seen by the crew of the ship *Hydra*, from that forteen favourite *The Illustrated Police News*. Owen concluded sea serpents were mostly misidentified whales.

For those “selfie moments”, there’s a complete cast of the fossil skeleton of *Dracorex hogwartsia*, the headbutting Cretaceous dinosaur named for its uncanny resemblance to the front end of the Potteresque Hungarian horntail variety of dragon. Although good luck getting a decent photo of yourself in front of *Dracorex*’s display case, what with the atmospheric low lighting.

There’s the skeleton of an American manatee, thought to be the identity of a mermaid sighted by Captain James Cook off Hawaii. Then there’s the unrolled five-metre (16ft) long skin of an Indian rock python, as well as a life-size giant squid model hanging from the ceiling, together with a large jar full of the pickled tentacles of a juvenile specimen removed from a whale’s stomach. And, for good measure, there’s a 4m- (13ft) long oarfish skeleton. We still know very little about the giant squid and the oarfish, nor do we know how cephalopod camouflage works.

There’s also a blown-up, interactive version of the sea monster-rich Olaus Magnus map of Scandinavia from 1539. Several original and very beautiful bestiaries from between 1500 and 1700 are on display too: one has a page open displaying various different species of unicorn.

Younger visitors who may not share a love of the forteen stuff will no doubt be ecstatic about the original *Harry Potter* wand props, Scamander’s magical



suitcase, which houses a whole zoo full of live specimens in the films, and reconstructed magical creatures from the franchise – mooncalves, a nifler, a musk-encuded erumpent mating display, the occamy and the bowtruckles.

In Scamander’s reconstructed shed, his magi-zoology kit gives way to real naturalists’ and explorers’ equipment from

Victorian times and the 1920s and 1930s, contemporary with the *Fantastic Beasts* films’ setting. There’s a packet of the awful “beef pemmican” emergency rations for polar explorers and some never-before-published or displayed full colour sketchbooks by forgotten 19th-century women naturalists.

The characteristics and behaviour of Rowling’s fantastic

LEFT: Natural History Museum scientists collect an ‘Erumpent’ horn. BELOW LEFT: Butterflies and stick insects galore.

beasts are reflected by real-life animals that are equally shy, elusive and difficult to study, as well as those that use camouflage, have elaborate mating displays, co-exist in symbiotic relationships, obsessively collect bright objects, can change their body size or are endangered because they’re hunted for their body parts.

Fictional mooncalves rub shoulders with real-life stuffed okapi (a dubious cryptid known as the “African unicorn” until 1901). There are dead leaf butterflies and a small selection of the 2,500 known species of stick-insects and leaf-insects.

Another favourite on display is the satin bower bird, which collects any throwaway plastic tat it finds as long as it’s bright blue – straws, bottle tops, whatever – to impress its mate. Some of the real-life symbiotic partnerships between species highlighted in the exhibition are so bizarre they would have been rejected from a *Fantastic Beasts* script as too fantastic. We are also introduced to the Galapagos marine iguana; it shrinks during food shortages, reabsorbing its bone material and expands again when the lean times are over. I won’t give away what the party trick of the rice grain-sized peacock spider is.

Admission starts at an eyebrow-raising £22 for adults, but we’ll need to get used to higher museum ticket prices for a while (everywhere, not just at NHM). All museums have a lot of lost income to recoup and social distancing means a lower volume of visitor traffic.

The exhibition has been put together “in accordance with Covid-19 guidelines”, but due to the new national lockdown, the Museum had closed once again before this review went to press. While we updates on re-opening, you can take a virtual stroll through the exhibition here: https://artsandculture.google.com/story/take-a-virtual-stroll-through-the-exhibition/CwIC5WiUgJ_VJw.

FORTEAN FOLLOW-UPS

Monoliths spread meme-like across the world and yet more critters appear in Christmas trees



ABOVE: Passers-by examine one of the many, many monoliths that have appeared in recent weeks, this one in Warsaw, Poland.

MONOLITH MADNESS [FT401:4]



Following the discovery of a mysterious monolith in a Utah canyon in November, at least 87 more have appeared around the world. The original structure was found on 18 November, although it appears to have been in the canyon since at least October 2016. It disappeared on 27 November; on the same day, a second monolith appeared in Piatra Neamt, Romania, disappearing on 2 December, when a third appeared in Atascadero, California.

Since then, more and more have appeared, and within a month, at least 87 similar metallic towers have sprung up around the world. Metallic structures have been spotted on the Isle of Wight, in Pittsburgh, the Netherlands, Morocco, Canada, Australia, and dozens of other locations.

Alex Apollonov, otherwise known as the prankster artist 'I Did A Thing', who, with his

friend Aleksa Vulovic and the comedy group Arty Donna, were responsible for installing a monolith in Melbourne, Australia, was quoted as saying: "There's heaps. I love it. I think it's great. It's kind of like a meme, an idea that catches on. And I think it says a lot about this year as a whole."

Travis Kenney, another monolith maker who, with the help of a friend was behind the monolith set up in Atascadero, California, said: "Everybody's been kind of just in a shit world," adding, "Our town got super excited about it." When Kenney and his pal Wade McKenzie installed their monolith on the top of Pine Mountain in Atascadero, they were only aware of two others: those in Utah and in Romania. Adding a third felt like the right thing to do, since in Kubrick's iconic *2001: A Space Odyssey* there were three monoliths. "I'm like, you know there's gonna be a third," Kenney told a journalist. "It's gonna happen. So why don't we build it?" So they constructed

the 400lb (181kg) pillar and hauled it two miles (3.2km) up a hiking trail.

Apollonov, Vulovic, and Arty Donna erected theirs less than a week later. They hired builders to make the structure out of zinc alloy, then transported it on top of their car to a forest outside of Melbourne. "We thought, 'Oh, 2020 is such a dire year', so we decided to do something about it," Apollonov said. "If you're determined and stupid enough, it's an easy enough thing to make," added Vulovic.

Although the Melbourne monolith was, like those in Atascadero and Romania, removed by local officials soon after its appearance, the edifices have inspired other people to erect their own. Most of these monolith makers have not come forward, but in some cases the craze has brought unexpected benefits. Online photos of a monolith that appeared outside The Paul Jolly Center for Pet Adoptions in San Antonio, Texas, led to increased traffic for the rescue pet organisation's

website, and a higher number of potential cat and dog fosterers. "It really is something that took us by surprise," said the executive director of the Animal Defense League of Texas. "We don't know who created it, we don't know how long we're gonna have it, but what we do know is it's certainly creating a wonderful outcome."

The Atascadero monolith was torn down by a group of men chanting "Christ is King", who replaced it with a wooden cross. But now a second monument has been erected in the same location; Kenney and McKenzie said they were given tacit permission by the town mayor. "She kind of gives us the verbal wink, wink: 'I want it back in the same spot where it was, but I want it permanent'," McKenzie said.

Interest in the monolith phenomenon has led to some attempts at financial gain. A New Mexico-based artist collective called The Most Famous Artist hinted that it was responsible for some of the enigmatic monuments. It is now selling three monoliths for \$45,000 each.

Meanwhile, more monoliths continue to appear around the world. A recent one appeared in Budapest, Hungary, bearing a plaque stating it was a gift of the Galactic Federation. *insider.com*, 20 Dec 2020.

THE AIRMAN VANISHES [FT351:4]



Royal Air Force serviceman Corrie McKeague, 23, went missing in September 2016

after a night out drinking with RAF colleagues in Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk. His disappearance sparked a major search operation with police spending 137 days on a £2million operation; they never found his body, despite combing landfill sites and rubbish dumps, sifting through 9,000 tons of rubbish. Four years later, Mr McKeague's body has still not been found,

but an inquest heard how he most likely died in the back of a dustbin lorry after climbing into a Greggs industrial bin and passing out while drunk. Witnesses said he had consumed a large amount of alcohol during his last evening alive, so much so that he was asked to leave a nightclub. He was described as being happy and friendly throughout the evening.

Mr McKeague was last seen alive at 3.25am on Saturday, 24 September 2016. CCTV footage showed him wandering into a back street behind a Superdrug pharmacy and a Greggs bakery shop, where there were several industrial waste bins. The bin he climbed into was emptied into the Biffa dustbin lorry at 4.19am and was recorded as weighing 116kg (18st 3lb), around 80kg (12st 7lb) heavier than usual, indicating that it could have been carrying the weight of a person. Police matched his mobile phone signal to the movement of the bin lorry. *D.Mail, 13 Nov 2020.*

UNEXPECTED FINDS IN CHRISTMAS TREES [FT389:10, 401:8]



2020's seasonal festivities saw a small owl and a koala being found in Christmas trees in

New York City and South Australia respectively, while the previous Christmas was notable for yet another owl and

a snake unexpectedly acting as tree decorations. The latest festive intruder was dealt with by Aberdeenshire police, who were called out to a deal with a sparrowhawk on the top of a Christmas tree.

The small bird of prey had flown into a house in Ellon, Aberdeenshire, during the afternoon of 22 December. Officers called for backup in the form of the local North East Wildlife and Animal Rescue Centre (New Arc), who helped release the sparrowhawk back into the wild, apparently none the worse for its indoor ordeal. Police Scotland said it was "definitely a change from a partridge in a pear tree". The tree's owner, Louise Anderson, told how the bird of prey had managed to get into her house. "I had let the dogs out and it flew through the back door," she explained. "It just sat there on the Christmas tree. It was very calm, but I was concerned for its safety so phoned for help. It was there for about 40 minutes – it was a spectacular bird." New Arc said the bird was "indeed an unusual decoration," adding: "We assisted police when they apprehended an intruder suspected of stealing Christmas fairies. After a full body search she was released without charge." The sparrowhawk was given a health check before release and was described as "fit and raring to go". *BBC News, 16 Dec 2020.*

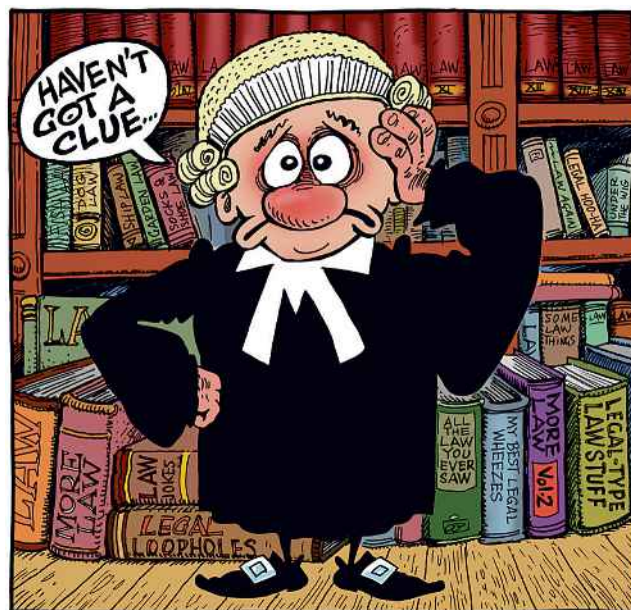


NEW ARC

MYTHCONCEPTIONS

by Mat Coward

257: IGNORANCE OF THE LAW



ILLUSTRATIONS BY HUNT EMERSON

The myth

Ignorance of the law is no defence.

The "truth"

Generally, yes – but far from always. Many legal systems, including those of England & Wales, and the USA, specifically allow for a defence of ignorance of the law in certain circumstances. The noted English judge Sir William Henry Maule ruled in 1846 that "There is no presumption in this country that every person knows the law: it would be contrary to common sense and reason if it were so." In tax cases, for instance, the sheer complexity of some regulations can mean that tribunals find it unreasonable that an ordinary taxpayer should be expected to study every new clause just in case it applied to them. Where a law has not been properly promulgated, a defendant may be able to establish that they could not have been expected to know of it. A defendant whose understanding of the law is based on incorrect official advice, or on law that has subsequently been overturned, may have a defence. More subtly, there is the question of statutes which require an offender to have "wilfully" broken a law; can your crime be wilful, if committed in ignorance?

Disclaimer

As we've said many times: don't take legal advice from magazine columns. Send corrections to our chambers, care of the letters page, where we have clerks specially trained in the handling thereof,

Sources www.galleyandtindle.co.uk/tribunal-finds-that-ignorance-of-the-law-can-be-a-reasonable-excuse/; www.legislation.gov.uk/; www.justia.com/criminal/defenses/mistake/; www.thsh.com/criminal-justice-insider/as-seen-on-tv-the-myth-of-pressing-and-dropping-charges/; www.lawsociety.org.uk/en/topics/blogs/no-gavels-please-were-british

Bonus myth!

Another legal myth, found in even the best crime fiction: the Detective Inspector's fury at the victim who "refuses to press charges". The villains will get away with it, and there's nothing we can do! In real life, victims of crime have no power to press or drop charges. The police and the prosecuting authorities alone decide whether to proceed.

THE CONSPIRASPHERE

Are scientists involved with Covid research really being assassinated? **NOEL ROONEY** offers his own tally of dead boffins and others, to the soundtrack of Petula Clark's 'Downtown'

COVID KILL LIST

A small number of scientists involved more or (decidedly) less directly in research into Covid-19 have met mysterious and occasionally violent ends over the past few months; this has stirred a rather large number of speculations in the Conspirasphere. If boffins are being bumped off, surely this proves what the conspiracists have been saying all along; that the whole coronavirus thing is a hoax, and those who know too much must be disposed of before they spill the beans.

There is an unwritten law in the ludic universe that when a significant and strange event – say a pandemic beset with controversy – gets our attention, it attracts other strange events to it like satellites or parasites. Mysterious deaths are regularly part of that process; and it is curious how often those mysterious deaths occur in the scientific community, as if boffins live in a slightly more dangerous version of the world than the rest of us. But clusters of strangeness and the law of large numbers have not discouraged the speculations of folk who do not believe in coincidence, ever.

Two stories stand out. Alexander Kagansky, a Russian scientist known for his work on brain tumours (and according to one online source, for his promotion of herbs and 'mushrooms' as a cancer treatment) was apparently working on a vaccine for Covid-19. He fell, dressed only in his underwear, from a 14th-floor window in a residential block in St Petersburg; his defenestration may have been exacerbated somewhat by the stab wounds found on his body.

A second murder occurred in the US. Bing Liu, a Chinese virologist working at the University of Pittsburgh



Aliens had been attacking the planet regularly since 2011

School of Medicine, was found dead in his home with multiple gunshot wounds. Liu was, according to reports, close to announcing a major breakthrough in our understanding of coronavirus when he was murdered.

Kagansky's alleged killer has been arrested, and Liu's alleged murderer was found in a car, dead from apparently self-inflicted gunshot wounds. But such simple resolutions fool no one in the Conspirasphere; there, the murders are referred to as assassinations, and the cases are most definitely open. And they are not alone; several other deaths have been added to the Covid assassination file: Frank Plummer, an eminent Canadian scientist, who died in Kenya during a conference, from an apparent heart attack; Gita Ramjee, an HIV expert who died of Covid-19 after visiting London for a conference; and Pyae Sone Win Maung, not a scientist, but a driver for the WHO, shot by persons unknown while transporting coronavirus samples in a war-ravaged region of Myanmar.

This amounts to grist for

the rumour mill; but it can also be read, reassuringly, as a sign that the classic tradition of conspiracy theory continues to influence the online version of it. The Conspirasphere is not just a wilful, knee-jerk meme fest; it has a firm epistemology behind it, and many conspiracists still work within that framework.

The Christmas bombing in Nashville, Tennessee, brought out the traditional rendition of conspiracy theory and the contemporary online version in equal measure. News reports strongly suggest that Anthony Quinn Warner (pictured), who (intentionally or otherwise) blew himself up in his RV outside an AT&T building, was a believer in the Reptilian Agenda conspiracy, as well as the Apollo Hoax, and was a 9/11 Truther; he also believed that aliens had been attacking the planet regularly since 2011, a war the media was covering up.

In the days before his death, Warner sent packages to acquaintances across the US, setting out his beliefs (and perhaps, his motivation for the bomb attack). The flippant tone of some of these letters and parcels ('Hey dude, you will never believe what I found in the park') chimes rather ominously in retrospect. And in the days after the incident, several suspicious RVs were intercepted by police forces in various parts of the US, though none turned out to be copycat bombers.

In some respects, Warner's death is a story in the same vein as that of the Phantom Patriot, Richard McCaslin; a terminal trip down the rabbit hole by a person who couldn't cope with the enormity of the new reality they were faced with. But the Conspirasphere didn't see it that way. Within hours of the explosion, videos emerged claiming to show a missile hitting the vehicle, or claiming a direct hit from an

electro-magnetic weapon; in other words, a false flag attack utilising the unfortunate Mr Warner (and his pet dog, Julio, sadly) as the patsy.

Conspiracist semiotics added to the mix. Several commentators spotted a steganographic element to the bomber's name; Anthony Quinn Warner contains the message 'Anon Q Warn'. Was the apparent tragedy a coded warning to QAnon followers? And if so, what was the subtext of the warning? Was the location, the AT&T building, holding information about the allegedly fraudulent election results? Was it something to do with the dreaded 5G rollout, and thus the coronavirus hoax? All of these theories have been offered, in an effort to place the event in the framework of the current grand narrative.

After a relative lull, the eruption of the kind of violence seen as domestic terrorism by the mainstream media, and false flag manipulation by the alt-right, has raised the temperature in the Conspirasphere at a time when rumours of civil war are resonant and rampant. A strange legacy, then, for a man who reportedly "spent time hunting for alien life forms in a nearby state park" and who, perhaps, has posthumously elevated Petula Clark's pop classic 'Downtown' – broadcast from his RV before it exploded – into a sinister new conspiracy meme.

SOURCES: www.naturalnews.com/2020-12-21-alexander-kagansky-working-on-covid-vaccine-assassinated.html; www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-52568716; www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-52366811; www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-51317386; www.cbsnews.com/news/nashville-bomber-anthony-quinn-sent-conspiracy-theories-to-people-before-explosion/



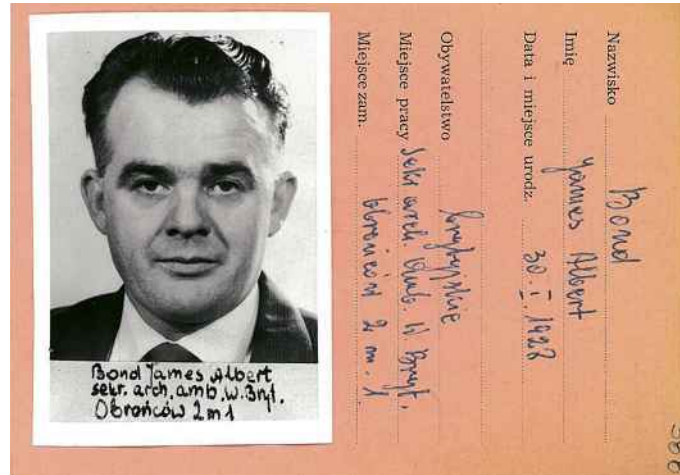
THE NAME'S BOND...

Secret Polish files reveal the strange tale of Jim Bond – but was he a diplomat, a spy or an unwitting decoy?

Włodzimierz Lechnio, a Polish archivist, recently found a curious folder in a warehouse of secret files in Warsaw dating back to the Cold War. In 1964, a British diplomat arrived in the Polish capital, then vanished, evading the minders detailed to shadow him. He was next seen snooping around a military base along the border with the USSR. The suspected agent was inconspicuous and undistinguished in appearance and behaviour, making him an ideal intelligence operative, save for one glaring fact: his name was James Bond.

The file, now declassified and recently posted on social media, has prompted a debate among Polish historians over whether the now-dead Mr Bond, officially an embassy secretary, was a spy or not. If he wasn't, why would a secretary be creeping around military bases? But if he was a spy, why keep the name James Bond? "I mean, come on," said Marzena Kruk, director of Poland's Institute of National Remembrance, which held the files. "He was a spy, doing spying things." Mr Lechnio thinks Bond was just a secretary. "The evidence here doesn't really indicate that he was a spy." MI6 has declined to comment, further fuelling the debate.

Retired Communist agents have discussed the case with their one-time boss Filip Hagenbeck, former leader of Communist Poland's Counterintelligence Branch Ten, the agency tasked with rooting out foreign spies. "Frankly speaking," said Mr Hagenbeck, "I don't think he was a spy." Instead, he assumes Mr Bond was a decoy, since the first Bond movie, *Dr No*, starring Sean Connery, had been released just two years previously, in 1962. Mr Hagenbeck believes that MI6 counted on the fact that a man with the name Bond would distract Polish counterintelligence from some more sensitive

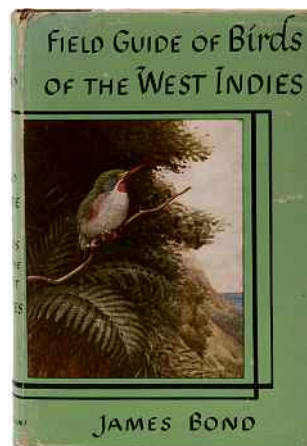


TOP: James Robert Bond's file was in the archive of Poland's Institute of National Remembrance. BELOW: Ian Fleming said that 007 was named after a well-known ornithologist. BOTTOM: A poster for the first Bond film, *Dr No*, released in 1962.

"They were sending him to make him some kind of bait"

operations under way at the same time. "They were sending him to make him some kind of bait," he explained. "To make counterintelligence chase him instead of other persons".

In contrast, Janette Bond, 88, Mr Bond's widow, says she doesn't know exactly what his clandestine mission was, but believes he was an espionage agent of some sort, recalling how she was told to join her husband after he was posted



to Warsaw to give him a more credible cover story. Once there, he sometimes communicated with her via handwritten notes at home because he feared the

Polish couple upstairs were listening in. Officially, her husband was employed by the British army, but based on his activities, she is pretty sure he was a secret agent. Nobody called him James Bond anyway – he was known as Jim. Being a spy with the same name of the most famous secret agent of all was just an unfortunate coincidence, she said.

The quest to find Ian Fleming's inspiration for the real James Bond has

gone on for decades. In a 1962 *New Yorker* interview Fleming said that he "wanted Bond to be an extremely dull, uninteresting man to whom things happened; I wanted him to be the blunt instrument. One of the bibles of my youth was *Birds of the West Indies*, by James Bond, a well-known ornithologist, and when I was casting about for a name for my protagonist I thought, My God, that's the dullest name I've ever heard, so I appropriated it."

Jim Bond's family say that he shared very few characteristics with Fleming's hero. Unlike 007, a product of Britain's elite boarding school system, Jim Bond was the son of a gamekeeper in Devon. "He wasn't suave," recalls brother-in-law Keith Tacchi. "Jim was an orders man; he joined the army and he played it by the book. He used to smoke a pipe, had a fisherman's cap. He was a totally laid-back person. He had one passion in life, which was golf, which he wasn't very good at."

Although his family say he wasn't a womaniser, Polish spies taking notes on his every movement saw different. Mr Bond was very careful, liked to drink, and, like his literary and cinematic namesake, showed an interest in women. His time in Poland was short, returning home one year after he arrived to become a commissioned officer in the British army. He served in Cyprus and Germany before being discharged due to ill health, and died in 2005.

In the early 1960s, when the Bond films began to hit the cinema, British intelligence agencies were being infiltrated by Soviet informants. The movies were popular with many Communist spies, according to Mr Hagenbeck, who says they enjoyed the sleek cars and glamorous women: "We were watching these movies with some kind of sentiment," he reminisced nostalgically. "You will get out of the service, but the service will never get out of you." *Wall Street Journal*; *D. Telegraph*, 23 Oct, 2020.



NECROLOG

This month, we say farewell to the controversial high society acid queen who went on to become Timothy Leary's lover and a psychedelic activist and author



LEFT: Joanna Harcourt-Smith with Timothy Leary at Heathrow Airport in 1973.

JOANNA HARCOURT-SMITH

Joanna Harcourt-Smith was born into a wealthy but complicated and dysfunctional family when her mother Marysia's waters broke as she was playing bridge at the Palace Hotel, St Moritz, in January 1946. Marysia's husband, Hungarian financier and lawyer Árpád Plesch, described by Joanna as "one of the most malefic creatures to roam the Earth", had formerly been married to Marysia's mother, the immensely rich Leonina Caro Ulam, once the mistress of Béla Kun, head of the short-lived and bloodthirsty Hungarian Soviet Republic. When Leonina died (or, according to Joanna, had been stabbed to death by her husband Plesch with a silver dagger) the evil financier

proceeded to first rape and then marry his wife's daughter, Marysia, in order to keep control of the family fortune. The resulting child, Flockie, was given a stand-in father when Plesch hired a Royal Navy officer, Commander Cecil Harcourt-Smith, to act as surrogate parent. He took his husbandly duties more earnestly than had been imagined, and fathered Joanna, but was not a presence in her childhood, and died when she was 10.

Joanna's mother used to tell her that she must have been determined to be born, having survived various unsuccessful miscarriage attempts. In the end, she arrived prematurely after six-and-a-half months, weighing just 3lb (1.4kg), unwanted then and through-

out her teenage years. When she complained to her mother about having been sexually abused by the family chauffeur, Marysia refused to believe her, saying: "A good chauffeur is hard to find".

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Joanna later immersed herself in drugs and promiscuity. During the 1960s and early 1970s she moved among the international bohemian elite, hanging out with Salvador Dali and the Aga Khan, and living with the Rolling Stones in France. The wedding for her first (and brief) marriage in 1966 was attended by Prince Rainier and Princess Grace of Monaco, Yul Brynner, and William Holden. A second marriage in 1971 also ended in divorce.

But it was as Timothy Leary's long-term partner that Joanna Harcourt-Smith became best known. She was introduced to Leary in 1972 by her then lover, the arms dealer (or, as he preferred to be known, 'weapons courier') Michel Hauchard, a shady character who financed Leary's stay in Switzerland on condition that he be assigned all future earnings from book publications as payment.

Joanna was then 26 and Leary was 52, a fugitive from the law following his escape from a Californian prison where he had been serving a 10-year sentence for possessing two joints, later increased to 20 years. Leary appeared to offer her psychological freedom, telling her she was "looking for a way out of the decadent aristocratic game, the limbo of Jet Set desperados", as she recalled in her autobiography *Tripping the Bardo with Timothy Leary: My Psychedelic Love Story* (2013). "I'll show you the way," he promised. Two weeks afterwards they were "married" in a hotel while under the

influence of cocaine and LSD, and after a few more weeks of acid-inspired fun, taking in Vienna and Beirut, they departed for Afghanistan. However, the lovers were apprehended by US agents on board their plane as it landed at Kabul airport. They were extradited back to the United States where Leary was again imprisoned. Harcourt-Smith stood by him, and claimed to have smuggled LSD into prison by placing a transparent tab on her belly button. "I felt exhilarated. I was smuggling dangerous drugs into their maximum-security prison," she wrote. "I heard the clunk of heavy metal doors and Timothy appeared dressed in an orange jumpsuit. I had moved the acid from my navel to my mouth and gently passed it from my tongue to his." While Leary was in prison, she helped him publish six books, also travelling to England, Italy and across the USA, lecturing about his imprisonment and campaigning for his release. "She had an edge and knew how to get her way. Her outspoken, upper-class European manner put people off," recalled Michael Horowitz, Leary's archivist. "Neither the counterculture nor the prosecutors and prison system knew what to make of her. Tim empowered her, and she in turn was tremendously loyal to him, dedicated to getting him out – whatever it took. Alienating many in the counterculture was the fallout from that."

This alienation came in 1976 after Leary became an FBI informant so as to secure his release from prison. Some of Leary's followers, unable to believe he had turned snitch, suggested that Joanna herself had persuaded him to do so. Further rumours held that she had been a US intelligence



operative from the beginning, luring Leary to Kabul so he could be arrested. The poet Allen Ginsberg branded her “a CIA sex provocateur”. Joanna felt she had been scapegoated and insisted that their becoming informants had not been her idea; instead, she said, Leary told her to tell the government that he was ready to cooperate. They went to live in New Mexico under the Witness Protection Program, using the aliases James and Nora Joyce. Shortly after Leary’s release, she gave birth to their son, Marlon Gobel, but their relationship was now coming to an end. They were both alcoholics, she recalled, fighting continuously until their final breakup.

By 1983 she was ready to begin a new phase of her life, putting an end to drink and drugs. She began a reconciliation with her daughter Lara, now in her twenties, whom she had not seen for 15 years. Lara said her mother had been “extremely traumatised” by her experience with Leary, “but we were both absolutely determined not to let the events of her life destroy us.”

In 2006 Joanna met Jose Luis Gomez Soler, a Spanish mystic, whom she married three years later. Together, they founded the futureprimitive.org website, hosting her weekly ‘Gaialogue’ podcasts, over 600 of which are now archived on the site. They record Joanna’s interviews with visionaries, authors, psychedelic researchers, academics and innovators, with the intention of exploring “what it is like to be in sacred communion with our living Earth”. The interviews focused on preserving oral traditions and uniting emergent communities.

She died at her Santa Fe home, surrounded by her family and close community. She is survived by her husband, daughter, two sons and three grandchildren.

Joanna Harcourt-Smith, socialite and author, born St Moritz, Switzerland, 13 Jan 1946; died Santa Fe, New Mexico, 11 Oct 2020, aged 74.



FAIRIES, FOLKLORE AND FORTEANA

SIMON YOUNG FILES A NEW REPORT FROM THE INTERFACE OF STRANGE PHENOMENA AND FOLK BELIEF

MEREMAIDS

Britain has, by my calculations, about 30 mermaid placenames: Mermaid’s Chair on Orkney, Mermaid’s Rock in Cornwall and Mermaid’s Kirk in Arbroath... There are several interesting patterns with these names, but the most shocking is the ratio of saltwater to freshwater sites.

Mermaids are creatures of the sea, surely? You would, after all, hardly expect to find a mermaid walking on the moors or gadding around in a mill pond. Yet only two thirds of British mermaid place-names are coastal sites. A third are to be found inland – some a long way inland.

Four examples, just to give a taste of the weird ways of... let’s call her, the ‘mermaid’. We have Mermaid’s Pond in Aspley Guise in Bedfordshire, whose waters were supposed to petrify wood. We had the small pool in Mermaid’s Spinney in Boxworth, Cambridgeshire. There is Mermaid Orchard at Nethebury where the resident mermaid lived in the pretty but shallow river Brit that ran alongside. Then we have the Mermaid’s Pool near High Peak in Derbyshire, an unremarkable brackish tarn among numinous heights. Of these four, the only body of water large enough for you or me to swim in, albeit hypothetically, would be Mermaid’s Pool. The others are good for nothing more than splashing about, tadpole hunting and sailing toy boats.

THERE ARE
FLEETING
REFERENCES TO
CHILD-KILLING
AND A BIT OF
SPECTRAL
NUDITY

What were the mermaids like? Well, forget ‘Mirror-and-Comb’, the stereotypical mermaid: beautiful, seductive, fish-tailed, long-haired, nice singing voice. The mermaids seem to belong to another species – one with sharper teeth. First, we have hints that they were amphibians rather than fish, in as much as they lived both in and out of the water. Indeed,

while the sea is Mirror-and-Comb’s habitat, these mean ponds and pools are only the lairs of the mermaid, from which she passes off into the countryside to do her work. And what did she do on her hours out? There are fleeting references to some unremarkable child-killing and a bit of spectral nudity; nothing that should shock the adepts of British folklore. But the truth is that we have no details. Indeed, I have never seen so little documentation for an important folklore

figure. I guess that the rise

of Mirror-and-Comb, the goody-two shoes mermaid, did for her inland cousin before folklore collection began properly in the later 1800s. Locals forgot the bogie out back in the Mermaid Pond. Village historians, meanwhile, today scramble to explain away such names with the imaginary presence of a Mermaid Tavern or Pub, “which was”, in the words of one chap I talked to yesterday, “just 30 miles away”. RIP Mermaid. Thanks for the fear, the drownings and the naked larks.

Simon has edited *Sheridan Le Fanu’s Scary Fairy Tales: Four Tales of Fairy Horror* (2020).



Believe it or not...

JENNY RANGLES says believers and sceptics can find common ground in the world of illusions

When I lived in Derbyshire I loved the bus ride on the TP – or ‘Trans Peak’. That dull name changed from ordinary to extraordinary when trans (as in ‘transit’ – here, across the beautiful Peak District) came to mean something entirely different in 2020 and no bus route would dare name itself that now for fear of a Twitter bloodbath.

As the route took me through gorgeous scenery – on my way to talk strange things on BBC Radio Derby – we passed through Ripley, which always made me smile because of its association with the ‘Ripley’s Believe it or Not’ exhibits. These are filled with the weird and wonderful and were almost a precursor to FT (see **FT230:48-51**).

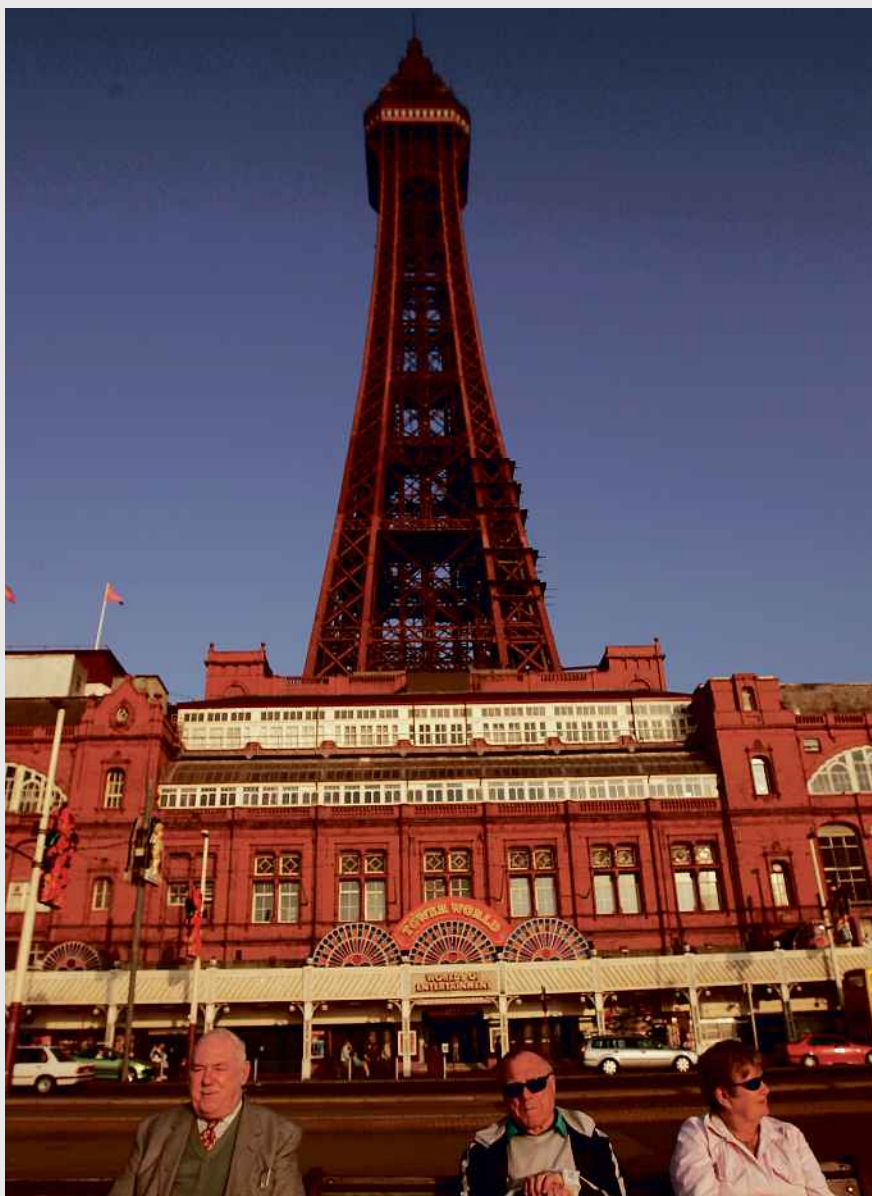
Back in the 1990s I made a TV show from the Ripley’s located on the seafront in Blackpool alongside, among others, James Randi, who sadly died recently (see **FT401:28-30** for his obituary). He was a notorious ‘skeptic’ of all things paranormal and a colourful character in his own right, but he gave me new insight into the idea that ‘seeing is believing’.

When it comes to the many extraordinary and entertaining topics in this magazine every month – but specifically UFOs – this is a crucial aspect of strange phenomena, but not one that is sufficiently discussed. Why do some people believe implicitly in the most remarkable things while others, such as Randi, will go to great lengths to disprove them in any way they can? Is it human nature to be in one camp or another? Are these two approaches enemies, or two sides of the same coin? Could they potentially complement one another in the quest for the truth?

Randi, of course, was a professional magician, and it is notable – and intriguing – how many illusionists appear to regard UFOs as an affront to their day job, which is about getting people to believe they have just witnessed the impossible. You would think that millions of people seeming to accept the possibility that UFOs piloted by little green men exist, yet never leave hard evidence behind, would be a great advert for belief in magic; but, for whatever reason, magicians seem to play down the idea.

Yet, as a ufologist I have learnt much in conversations with illusionists. In Los Angeles, I spoke to a man who helped design spectacular tricks for famous magicians who provided me with insights into how they work as they do. Obviously, I will not spoil any illusions here – apart from one generality.

Say you want to make the audience believe that Blackpool Tower has



BRUNO VINCENT / GETTY IMAGES

ABOVE: Is it possible to make Blackpool Tower vanish? Probably not – but an accomplished illusionist might be able to make an audience *believe* that it had disappeared...

Why do some people believe in remarkable things, while others go to great lengths to disprove them?

disappeared in front of their eyes. How can you do this? The Tower is huge. You know it cannot vanish. But you can make the audience *believe* it has gone.

How? Well, the answer is obvious when you are told it. Seeing Blackpool Tower depends on two things: the audience looking at the Tower and the Tower itself. If the Tower vanishes, then one of those things is no longer there. You either move the Tower or you move the audience without them

knowing it, so they think they are still looking at where the Tower should be. It seems both simple and obvious once explained, although the design of the illusion and the ability to carry it out successfully are much more difficult and will either make or break the magic.

That was the day I realised that magicians and 'skeptics' were not the mortal enemies of the ufologist. They were just looking at the same things I was, just slightly differently. They were focusing on the audience, not the tower: an entirely different perspective that changes possibilities. It remains the same event: the tower disappears either way, just in a sense that we don't usually consider.

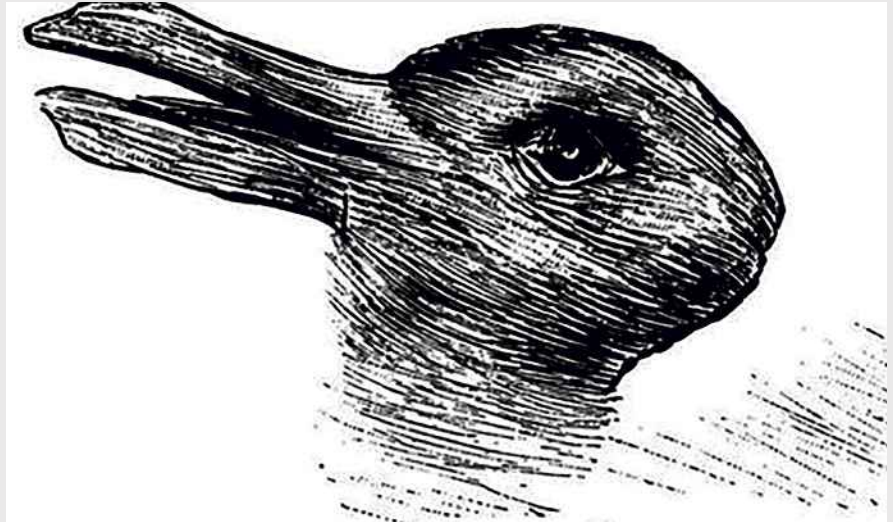
Does something really have to be strange or true? Can it not be both, as was implied by the title of a TV show I was closely involved in making around the time I met Randi? That series was called *Strange But True?* on purpose. That question mark at the end often got missed, but was crucial because we were determined to show that either or both possibilities could apply.

Strange But True? was about weird things and how they happened – not about an opposition between fact and fiction. In the Eighties I made a radio series for the BBC called *Fact or Fiction*, only to realise when doing it that the title was misleading. *Strange But True?* was far better, and being an entertainment show for ITV that ran for several years was primarily about telling stories with the caveat that we looked at both sides. We never featured cases that could not be genuine, but we knew that 'strange or true' covered a much wider spectrum than 'either/or'.

Part of the brief for the tie-in books that I wrote was to address both sides of that divide. It caused us not to touch a number of stories, such as the Alien Autopsy footage (see **FT395:32-36**) that appeared as we were airing. Much the same happened at the BBC when I was making a TV documentary and by chance filmed interviews just as the autopsy footage made its debut. I take no sides on the veracity of the autopsy story here, but use this to show how ufology has always been about balancing evidence and interpretation. Both sceptics and believers – and magicians and ufologists – can help each other by providing checks and balances on drifting too far in one direction. Simply accepting an extraordinary claim as fact is no more helpful than rejecting it flat.

In the field of anomalies one always needs to consider both options – and even that fact or fiction can meet in the middle when it comes to evaluating the extraordinary. Indeed, until you actually grasp this fluidity of reality – that things can be both strange and true, or even strange and untrue, or indeed true and not very strange – then you will not really appreciate how each outcome is equally valid. Just different.

'Truth' is no simple conclusion when investigating the 'paranormal': it undercuts a bond of illusion around which life revolves.



ABOVE: The duck/rabbit illusion – is it one or the other? Or both? **BELOW:** The television series *Strange But True?* offered a spectrum of possible explanations for strange phenomena rather than an either/or.

We see shifting sparks of energy deep within and our brains match these against past experience and possibility to 'perceive' what is 'real'. The rabbit/duck illusion shown above demonstrates this at work. What do you 'see' in the picture – a rabbit or a duck? It can be either. Or both. In fact, the ability to

see both is a good thing.

At times seeing is more about creating than believing. And flexibility in switching possibilities is something worth developing, something we should be trained in, because in paranormal research having one mindset breeds misdirection. Which is just what the illusionists crave.

This I think is why states of consciousness like the Oz Factor are important to what occurs

with strange phenomena. They reflect the duck/rabbit flip-flop. There is no right or wrong. The one you see is as 'true' as the one you do not see, but says something about how we create what we perceive. Illusionists like Randi long had a kinship with the paranormal for just such reasons, possibly in ways they did not understand. It's an area that attracts explorers of the edges of reality, much as it does those who eagerly read *FT*.

Paranormal researcher or debunker, skeptic or magician, UFO investigator or illusionist – they are all just different takes. Hence modern illusionist Derren Brown made a TV special about mystery and belief using expert tricks that seem supernatural but, of course, are not. He went to Todmorden – West Yorkshire's UFO-haunted valley (see **FT325:27, 326:27, 327:29, 328:28-30**) – to film it. Context was part of the illusion.

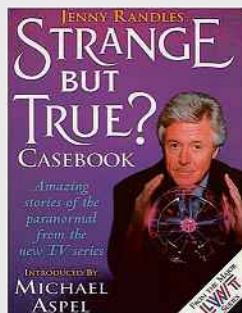
There is a necessary deal with the Devil when you explore how the mind deals with the inexplicable. It cuts more ways than one. There is little difference between master manipulation via skilled illusion and a person perceiving the extraordinary who prioritises acceptance of 'strange' over 'true'. And

the winds of chance can always weave themselves into the equation. The show Derren Brown made was about luck and how a statue of a dog in a park next to where one of Britain's best-known alien contact cases had occurred might somehow convey that magic. But less known is that tragedy struck one accidental star of the show who 'gained luck' via the statue on TV. Later he met a tragic end in a terrible accident as he crossed the road (see **FT349:56-57** for the full story of Todmorden's 'lucky' dog). This was not mystical or 'paranormal', but it was very forlorn. Life is cruel at times – as we all learned in 2020 via the Covid-19 pandemic – however, it remains tempting to read about this unfortunate sequel and think it represents something mysterious. It's very easy to weave magic in your head around what was simply mischance following in the footsteps of good luck, just as it often does in life.

Illusionists use the same raw materials as ufologists and psychics, but build very different visions of reality out of them. They opt to take a different path regarding what is strange or true; and in a sense it doesn't matter much who is right or who is wrong. Indeed, perhaps it is the search for answers that really counts rather than the universal veracity of answers that either group defines.

So over the years I have never had disdain for sceptics (or 'skeptics') or regarded illusionists as bitter enemies. We are two souls seeking truth in slightly different ways and we can, if we cast aside presumptions, learn much from one another. It really doesn't matter who finds the answers to the questions that a UFO event poses – and in many cases there may be multiple answers presenting different truths to different viewers.

We should celebrate that more than we do and try to set aside the idea that debunkers are the enemy of true believers. In doing so, I have found that new insights emerge that can guide us all. The one thing that really matters – strange or true, fact or fiction – is understanding.



DEATH SHIP

The Final Voyage of the Ourang Medan

A sudden distress call sent by a ship that carries a dead crew frozen in terror and a lethal cargo... this unfathomable mystery has haunted the pages of naval history for more than half a century.

THEO PAIJMANS asks what really happened during the final voyage of the *Ourang Medan*?

The world learned of the bizarre incident in January 1948, when a Dutch weekly newspaper printed an unusual article headed 'Mysterious Demise of the *Ourang Medan*'.¹ Its sensational introduction was sure to pull readers in: "A riddle of the sea. Since the mutiny on the *Bounty* and the downfall of the *Titanic*, an incident as unexplained and inexplicable as the tragedy of the *Ourang Medan*, the great cargo ship, which was found, unharmed, in the Pacific Ocean with a dead crew. The only authentic eyewitness account of this mysterious catastrophe follows here – but no explanation can be given – the solution to the riddle is unknown to anyone."

Two photographs accompanied the article: one of a ship lying on its side in the sea, another of a naval officer lying on deck, his face not visible. So began the saga of the death ship *Ourang Medan*, which has since then appeared worldwide in magazines, newspapers, books and websites. Like the famous *Flying Dutchman*, this ghost ship still cannot find peace.

The author claimed to be an eyewitness to the incident: "The mystery of the *Ourang Medan* is one of the secrets the sea will not reveal. Even though I have seen the ship myself, even though I have seen and touched the 22 dead sailors and their officers on the deck and on the bridge of the *Ourang Medan*, I have no explanation for the fate of this ship and its crew."

The author's vessel was sailing about 400 nautical miles southeast of the Marshall Islands in mid-June 1947 when it received a radio message and an SOS signal from the *Ourang Medan*. It immediately changed course and headed to the location given in the message. But then, contact was suddenly lost: "We received another confused sequence of dots and dashes, as if the hand of the radio operator in his death throes



LEFT: The story of the *Ourang Medan* as it appeared in the Dutch newspaper *Elseviers Weekblad* of 17 January 1948.

still hammered the Morse key. Only three words came through intact: I am dying..."

The next day, his ship reached the location where the *Ourang Medan* was drifting with no sign of life. A small group of sailors, including the narrator, decided to inspect the ship and climbed aboard. They encountered a scene from a nightmare: "There were corpses everywhere... And the most terrible thing was the spasmodic postures of the dead, their faces expressing a terrible fear – their mouths and eyes were wide open, as if they had died from sheer horror."

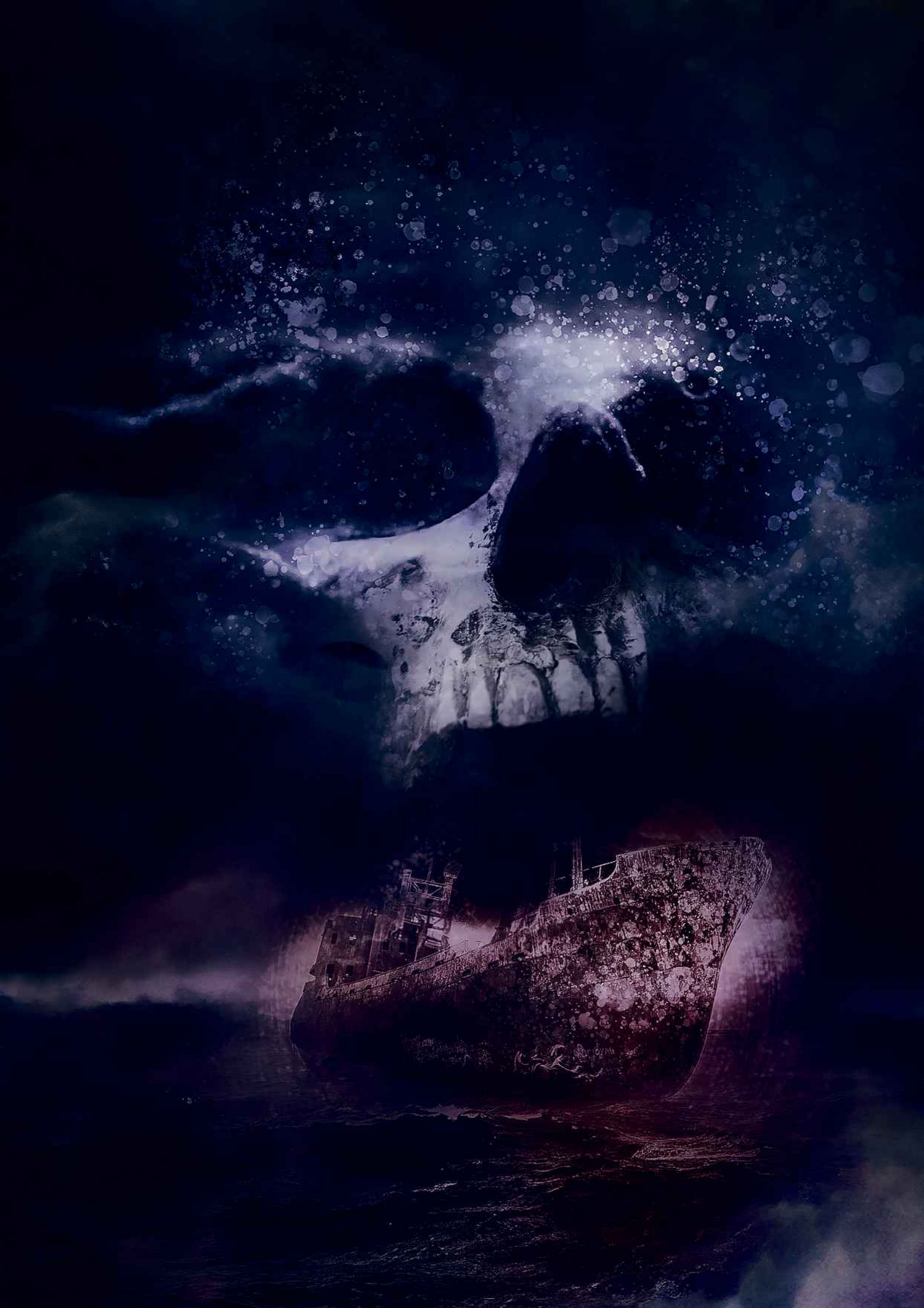
What caused this tragedy was a mystery, since there were no traces of blood or signs of violence. They located the dead radio operator. "He was still wearing his headphone set; its wires moved slowly with the sluggish movement of the ship. We looked at him for a long time. His fingers, squeezed together into a fist, could have revealed the mystery to us. What had happened? What horror had killed the 22 people on board this ship? What had ended their lives without spilling a single drop of blood?" They could not investigate any further as suddenly a fire broke out and they had to immediately

abandon the ill-fated ship. "In the meantime it became evening. But no one went to their bunks. All stood at the railing, staring at the burning mystery." The *Ourang Medan* blazed all night; at daybreak it sank ingloriously to the bottom of the Pacific Ocean.²

EYEWITNESS TO THE NIGHTMARE

The story did not go down with the *Ourang Medan* however. Two more instalments followed. The second one introduced the writer:

"WHAT HAD ENDED THEIR LIVES WITHOUT SPILLING A SINGLE DROP OF BLOOD?"





ABOVE: A photograph showing a dead naval officer, one of the 22 unexplained corpses reportedly found on the deck and bridge of the *Ourang Medan*.
BELOW: A 1954 retelling of the *Ourang Medan* story in a 32-page booklet by German author Otto Mielke entitled "The Death Ship of the South Sea".

"The author, Silvio Scherli, is now in Trieste. He vouches for the authenticity of this story. As we have no further information than what is contained in these follow-ups, we will have to do with the author's personal assurance." It also mentioned that there was a survivor from the death ship. A Franciscan missionary from Taongi Atoll, part of the Marshall Islands, reported that a shipwrecked man had washed ashore there. Before he died a few days later, he told the clergyman about mysterious documents, a captain of ill repute and a cargo of some 15,000 crates ferried from an obscure Chinese port. The *Ourang Medan* had set out on a covert voyage, far from the well traversed shipping lanes. But on the 15th day, a disaster had unfolded and its crewmembers had dropped dead with expressions of horror on their faces.³

In the third and final instalment the castaway revealed the contents of the documents: "My suspicions, which had been aroused in me for days, had been true. We were transporting 15,000 cases and drums of sulphuric acid, nitro-glycerine in liquid form and other chemicals, the name of which has escaped me. There was a note at the bottom of the list: the liquid nitro-glycerine must not be added to the sulphuric acid. It was advisable to load the various goods into different holds. The packaging was not intended for transport by sea."

The swaying of the ship caused a number of barrels of sulphuric acid to rupture and the deadly vapours to escape.

The story left few leads. The ship sank; the only eyewitness was no longer alive and buried on a remote tropical island. And there was no name: "This was the

"HE WAS BURIED BY THE OLD PALM IN THE CEMETERY BEHIND THE MISSIONARY BUILDING"



SEEFAHRT
IN ALLER WELT



story the missionary told. I am not allowed to tell his real name. He was a German... He was buried by the old palm in the cemetery behind the missionary building."⁴ The *Ourang Medan* story, on the other hand, was far from buried: it was about to embark on a long journey.

THE SECRET CARGO

A few newspapers in the Dutch colonies were first to repeat the story, even while expressing doubts as to its veracity: "The denouement gives us reason to repeat that we have no other information about this 'riddle of the sea'. The many questions unresolved in this account cannot be answered. The obvious conclusion is that this story is a fantasy, a fascinating romance. On the other hand, there is the statement of the author, Silvio Scherli, in Trieste, who persists in his assurance of authenticity."⁵ A newspaper from Surinam mentioned that the ship's crew were Indonesian, but didn't reveal how it came by this information.⁶

Any editorial red-flagging didn't hinder the story's progress, though. In July, the tragic fate of the *Ourang Medan* was reported in an Austrian newspaper.⁷ In October, it reached the Italian media.⁸ In the same month, it was covered in the American press on an unprecedented scale. It was printed in *American Weekly* as 'Secrets of the Sea', ensuring that literally millions of Americans became aware of it.⁹ The tale's main ingredients remained the same, but details varied. The American republication, for instance, reported that the original story in the Dutch weekly was

In 1954, German maritime author Otto Mielke even saw fit to publish a 32-page booklet titled *Das Totenschiff in der Südsee* ('The Death Ship of the South Sea').¹³ He told a familiar story, but crucial details differed in his retelling. Mielke, who was a former Kriegsmarine sailor during World War II, claims that it was not an Italian ship that found the *Ourang Medan*, but an American steamer named *Silver Star*. He

In the 1950s, the story of the ill-fated ship entered fortune. It surfaced in the pages of magazines such as *Fate* and later *SAGA*, which asked if its crew might have seen “something so terrifying, so alien to their way of life that they were stupefied with horror and frozen into immobility before they were destroyed in a manner beyond our present knowledge?”¹⁵ UFO and mysteries writer Frank Edwards introduced the riddle to Canadian readers as “a true mystery tale” in one of his columns on the unexplained¹⁶ and early UFO and fortune writers such as Morris K. Jessup, Vincent Gaddis and Ivan T. Sanderson mentioned it in their books.¹⁷ When Jessup’s *Case for the*



Even these days, the riddle of the *Ourang Medan* is the sort of mystery that can easily lead to obsession, as English author and FT contributor Roy Bainton has attested. He

SECRETS OF THE SEA

What ship?
There is no ship.
The Oorang Median has vanished.

There are no mysteries as tantalizing as those
of the sea.
All the surfaces of earth have been explored
and what lies within the earth, miles deep, man
knows.

The secrets of the skies are being swiftly un-
folded. Man flies above the topmost clouds, in-
vestigates the atmosphere, and probes the



spects the planets through powerful telescopes, launches his balloons 20 miles above earth to observe the cosmic rays, drives his rockets to heights that stretch the imagination, bounces a radar signal off the face of the distant moon.

But of the sea and the ways of the sea and especially of the depths of the sea, man still has only a fragmentary knowledge. His submarines and diving bells are exploring instruments for the comparative shallow. His sound devices have no eyes. His sounding weights are attached to steel

ables reveal only the depth, not what lies within the depth. The deeper withhold their secrets in thousands of cubic miles of challenging oceans: strange monsters, strange turbulences, strange happenings.

And something of the strangeness of the deep rises occasionally to the surface to provide man kind with a mystery never to be solved except by conjecture.

Strange happenings—a wind arose to wreck the Spanish Armada and save an empress. A bird

match of liberant fog on a clear day" brought S.S. Empress of Ireland and S.S. Stockholm together with loss of 1,053 lives. The admiral drove HMS Camperdown and HMS Victoria together in a maneuver prearranged by his captain. "Unavoidable" Titanic's insufficient lifeboats were not filled.

The glory of the Oorang Median first came to light half way around the world from where she vanished, and six months later. It was printed in a Boston newspaper, *Essex's Weekly*, last January, through her attorney's agent in the city.

[illegible]

This was followed by a confusing succession of data and dashes "as if the hand of the operator was still banging automatically on the transmitter in death agony."

The *Ourang Medan* was the last words came through from the ship.

Efforts to contact her again failed. The rescue ship turned toward her. The Italian officers had the *Ourang Medan's* registry, though Lloyd's had not. He described her and said she was used between 1935 and 1937 as a transport for Chinese troops.

The *Ourang Medan* was located early in the afternoon of the following day, 56 miles from the position given, flying no flag, listing slightly to starboard as if one might have come along and lifted her. One burg might have come along and lifted her. One burg might have come along and lifted her. One burg might have come along and lifted her.

The most frightening thing was the spasmodic attitude of the bodies and the convulsive expression of the faces.

An inspection of cabins was under way when the rescue ship halted the boarding party with a warning that smoke had been observed coming from No. 4 Hatch of Guraing Medan. The boarders scrambled down ropes to their boat and were only a few yards away when an explosion occurred between decks and flames leaped from the hatch. Three more explosions followed, the Guraing Medan was enveloped by flames, heeled over and sank.

Conjecture ran the gamut from radioactive substances to piracy by the actual vessel purporting to have been on a rescue mission. The picture of the second officer was said to look like that of a man who had been shot in the back.

LONDON believes Durang Medan was a Dutch vessel taken by the Indonesians when the Japs were defeated, perhaps engaged in gun-running or smuggling. The Indonesians would not admit knowing her because she carried illicit cargo and their case against the Dutch was in a delicate stage with the good offices commission of the United Nations.

What did she carry? What caused her ship? Why was there no sign of fire when she was first sighted? If some deadly fumes had developed from shifting cargo, why were not members of the boarding party affected by them? Only the sea itself can answer—or the ocean.

Only the sea itself can answer for the loss of the Pacific islanders' lives. Here is a report lost in from 1,000 London which says a lone survivor of Ourang Naoi is believed to have landed on a small Pacific island, and others in the area are missionary that the islanders' mysterious disappearance was caused by two chemical substances getting mixed in the holds. He left the ship against orders, alone in the single lifeboat launched.

There could be a lot of truth in this, but there are no names and no details, and similar reports turned up after the vanishing of other ships and peoples without foundation. If this is true it does not explain why members of the boarding party died.

—Lynn and I have been

THE AMERICAN WEEKLY 25

ABOVE: A dramatic presentation in a 1948 issue of *American Weekly*. **TOP:** A fortean take on the tale appeared in Vincent Gaddis's 1965 book *Invisible Horizons*.

included the story in his *The Mammoth Book of Unexplained Phenomena* (2013). Bainton admitted that he had been researching the case for more than 30 years without success, although he left no stone unturned. He searched fruitlessly through Lloyd's Shipping Register and he visited the shipping registers in Amsterdam, but there too came up empty-handed. He did become acquainted with a German researcher, Theodor Siersdorfer, from the city of Essen. Even more obsessed with the strange fate of the *Ourang Medan*, Siersdorfer confessed that he had been tirelessly working on the riddle for 45 years. In all that time he had found not a single trace of its existence.²⁰

As recently as 2014 the *Ourang Medan* resurfaced in a Russian magazine published in St Petersburg.²¹ According to Russian researcher Mikhail Gershtein, the tale has been well known in the former Soviet Union since the 1960s, and has been mentioned

in many Soviet magazines and books – for instance in Lev Skryagin's *Voice of the Sea* (1973). It was even used as a plotline in fiction; in Nikolai Vnukov's novel *Suerre calls for help* (1978), the mystery is explained as the result of the launch of a Nazi secret weapon, a torpedo loaded with poison gas and a magnetic detonator.²²

Just last year the story was retold in a German nautical magazine with, as we have come to expect, yet another new detail: the castaway now has a name.²³ But if several dedicated researchers spent decades on the case without finding any trace, how much of the grisly tale of the *Ourang Medan* is actually true? In order to find that out, we must travel further back in time, beyond the Dutch weekly that initially broke the story.

THE FINAL JOURNEY

It is December 1940, World War II is raging and the Netherlands, Belgium, and part of

France are occupied and groaning under the Nazi regime. In Vichy-France, the magazine *7 Jours* still appears every week, filled with light-hearted gossip, no doubt approved by Nazi censors. But on 29 December, surprisingly, the story of the *Ourang Medan* turns up in its pages, complete with the photo of the dead officer that was to be published eight years later in the Dutch weekly. Again, the article is without an author's name.²⁴ Nine months later, on 7 September 1941, *7 Jours* prints the conclusion in its bedsheet sized pages: "The Mystery of the *Ourang Medan* is Solved," it proclaims.²⁵ Again, we encounter differing details: the most notable one is that the death ship wasn't found in June 1947, but nearly a decade earlier, on 13 November 1939. And it wasn't found by an anonymous Italian ship or the steamer *Silver Star*, but by an American destroyer.

Eight years before it appeared in the Dutch weekly, the story had already been widely circulated. In December 1940, an Italian newspaper carried the story.²⁶ In November 1940, English newspapers reported the demise of the *Ourang Medan* with the familiar ingredients of a mysterious SOS signal, an explosion, a sudden fire that destroyed the ship and the dead crew.²⁷ And the trail doesn't end here. A month earlier, in October 1940, three Austrian newspapers printed the *Ourang Medan* mystery story. "Drama in the Pacific" was one headline, "SOS of Mutiny Ship" another, "The Secret of the Death Ship" the third.²⁸

Exhuming the facts and trying to discover the true fate of the *Ourang Medan* means further peeling back the layers of time, as one of the Austrian newspapers mentions an even older source: an Italian newspaper named *Piccolo di Trieste* – the city where Silvio Scherli, author of the 1947 Dutch story, lived. I contacted the staff of the library and archives in Trieste, who located a copy of the edition that carried the story. The incredible tale is printed on the third page of the paper, ironically resembling the layout of the Dutch weekly that started the whole postwar global dissemination of the *Ourang Medan* story. Again, the same photos of a dead naval officer and a ship keeling over on its side appear under the heading "Il Mistero dell' *Ourang Medan*". The story also carries the name of its author: Silvio Scherli-Scherli.

And again, what Scherli writes is largely the same – but, as we have come to expect, with differing details.

This, though, marks the very first time that the final voyage of the *Ourang Medan* appeared in print. And in this first article we read that it was not an unnamed Italian vessel, the steamer *Silver Star* or an American destroyer that found the doomed ship: instead it was the American torpedo boat W716.²⁹ This should have been easy enough to establish; but in response to my question, the US Coast Guard informed me that no torpedo boat named W716 was operational in 1939, and that this particular type of coding was not even in use at the time.³⁰

By now, it should be clear what actually



ABOVE: The first appearance of the *Ourang Medan* story in an Italian newspaper of 1940. FACING PAGE: An illustration from a recent Russian account by A Leshukonskii in a 2014 issue of *Tainy XX Veka* magazine

took place. Silvio Scherli-Scherli crafted a template attractive enough to resell to different newspapers and magazines for eight long years. Along the way he altered decisive and crucial details to fit the timeframe, such as the ships that came to the rescue or in what year the *Ourang Medan* was found. And if editors expressed their doubts, Scherli was quick to assure them that his story was the real deal.

Who was Silvio Scherli? At my request, a number of Italian forteans dived into the minutiae of Italian journalism – but to no avail. We know that he lived in Trieste at some time, but other than that Scherli did not leave much of a trace.

What did emerge is a document that may tell us something about his *modus operandi*. On 7 February 1954 Scherli wrote a letter to Paul Hahn, then President of the American Tobacco Company in New York. It included Scherli's letterhead with his address in Trieste. Scherli introduced himself as a freelance journalist working for "leading European newspapers and magazines". He made a strange proposal. For the sum of \$780, Scherli offered all his research material on lung cancer cases in a large number of countries, including the Netherlands, Belgium, Austria, Italy and Sweden.³¹

Was this an amateurish attempt at extortion? We'll never know. Like the *Ourang Medan*, Scherli disappeared into the mists of history.



THE MYSTERY OF THE MARY CELESTE

What remains are the photographs. It seems illogical to take a photo camera along on a 1930s rescue mission to board a ship in distress, and the photos do not really tell us much. They are certainly atmospheric set pieces to illustrate the story, but they lack conclusive identifiers. Trieste is a large port city, so Scherli could easily have staged the photograph of the dead naval officer on board any ship. And since war was raging he could have obtained a photo of a keeling ship through other channels.

But where did Scherli come up with his idea? That answer is found in some newspapers that mention another mystery ship: the

Mary Celeste. Scherli recycled elements from one of the most famous mysteries in maritime history, which explains the enduring appeal of his *Ourang Medan* pastiche.

On 7 November 1872 the brig *Mary Celeste* left New York carrying more than 1,700 barrels of raw alcohol. She was found adrift on 5 December, 500 miles off the coast of Gibraltar. Sailors who boarded the ship found it abandoned. The only sloop was gone. To this day, the fate of the crew of the *Mary Celeste* is unknown. One theory is that the crew feared an explosion and left the ship in a hurry because the barrels of raw alcohol were damaged in a storm and toxic fumes were dispersed (see FT151:6-7).

Ironically, there was a cargo ship called the *Medan* that sailed between the Netherlands and Indonesia. She was launched on 13 August 1910. The *Medan* could carry six passengers and sailed under the flag of the NV Rotterdamse Lloyd shipping company. After 20 years of faithful service the *Medan* was sold on 24 June 1930 and scrapped on 18 July in Kobe, Japan. In 1916 she transported a rare monkey, a black Siamang, from Indonesia to New York, with the Bronx Zoo as its final destination.

➡ **THEO PAIJMANS** is a Dutch writer, editor and journalist. He is the author of a history of free energy and its inventors, and his writings appear in several newspapers and magazines. He is a regular contributor to *Fortean Times*.

NOTES

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2 Ibid.

3 'De geheimzinnige Ramp der Oerang Medan. De enige overlevende', *Elseviers weekblad*, 14 Feb 1948, p4.

4 'Het mysterie der Ourang Medan opgelost', *Elseviers Weekblad*, 28 Feb 1948, p19.

5 'Een Mysterie van de Zee. Kramachtige Houding der Doden', *De Locomotief*, 3 Feb; 'Ondergang der Ourang Medan. Voor het Eerst werd ik Bang', *De Locomotief*, 28 Feb 1948; 'Mysterie der Ourang Medan. De Dodelijke Zwavel-Zuur Gassen Doortrokken het Gehele Schip', *De Locomotief*, 13 Mar 1948.

6 'Schip vergaan', *De West: Nieuwsblad uit en voor Suriname*, 16 April 1948.

7 'Der Untergang der Ourang Medan', *Obersteirische Volkszeitung*, Leoben, Obersteiermark, Austria, 24 July 1948.

8 Ennio Garieri, 'Il Mistero dell'Ourang Medan', *L'illustrazione del Popolo*, 31 Oct 1948, p5.

9 *American Weekly* was a Sunday newspaper supplement published by the Hearst Corporation that at

its height had a circulation of over 50 million readers.

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Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, 27 June 1964.

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22 Email correspondence with Mikhail Gershtein, 15-16 Feb 2017.

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24 'Les Sauveteurs trouvèrent un navire immobile et un équipage

de cadavres... et l'Ourang-Medan disparut avec son secret', *7 Jours*, no 13, 29 Dec 1940, p6.

25 'Après Vingt Mois. Le Mystère de Ourang-Medan est Éclairci', *7 Jours*, no 45, 7 Sept 1941, p9.

26 Silvio Scherli-Scherli, 'Il Mistero dell' Ourang-Medan', *L'illustrazione Italiana*, 8 Dec 1940, p846.

27 'Mystery SOS From Death Ship. Unwounded Bodies Found on Deck. Explosions Defeated Boarding Party', *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 21 Nov 1940; 'Crew Dies In SOS Mystery', *Daily Mirror*, 22 Nov 1940; 'Story of Weird Sea Tragedy', *Hampshire Telegraph*, 29 Nov 1940.

28 'Drama Im Stillen Ozean', (*Neuigkeits*) *Welt Blatt*, Vienna, 20 Oct 1940; 'SOS vom Meutererschiff', *Illustrierte Kronen Zeitung*, Vienna, 20 Oct 1940; 'Das geheimnis des Totenschiffes', (*Österreichische*) *Volks-Zeitung*, Vienna, 29 Oct 1940.

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31 www.industrydocuments.ucsf.edu/tobacco/docs/#id=lrwp0215.



THE RUSKINGTON HORROR

PART 2

ROB GANDY concludes his examination of the strange phenomenon of ‘The Ruskington Horror’ – terrifying encounters with ghostly figures on a particular stretch of Lincolnshire road – by looking at witness testimony collected since the original *This Morning* broadcasts first brought the story to light in 1998.

In my first article about ‘The Ruskington Horror’ (FT401:32-38) I concentrated on what happened on ITV’s *This Morning*, the daytime TV programme that brought the strange story to light back in 1998. At the end of the final discussion Shirley Wallace, the psychic researcher/medium, put her “head on the chopping block” by saying the area was now “clear”, leading Richard Madeley to conclude that the phenomenon was now “over!” However, Shirley’s contention would appear to have been overly optimistic, as will be seen below.

My own researches involved checking for witness statements on the Internet and in the newspapers, and a ‘call’ through local media for witnesses to get in touch with me with related stories.¹ I confess that I was delighted by the number and nature of the responses I received. However, only eight related specifically to the Ruskington Horror ‘focal site’; the others were spread right across Lincolnshire and will be the subject of further articles. I begin with what is publically available.

SOME INTERNET AND OTHER CASES

There are many references to ‘The Ruskington Horror’ in books and online, but they mostly quote the cases from *This Morning*. Of course, Internet stories vary in size, sometimes containing only limited detail, and cannot always be verified. Nevertheless, I present summaries of those found.

TALL BIKER

A story posted to the Internet on 14 November 2013 states that “a driver spotted a tall male figure, wearing a leather jacket, with medium length black hair standing on the roadside. The witness said that the figure literally appeared out of nowhere and vanished soon after being seen.”²

INVISIBLE HANDS

Joe and his partner were travelling from Boston late at night, and decided to pull in at a



LEFT: Presenters Richard Madeley and Judy Finnegan on the set of ITV’s *This Morning*.

THEY FELT AS IF THEY WERE BEING STRANGLER BY AN INVISIBLE HAND

lay-by near Ruskington for a smoke. There was little traffic and it was fairly quiet. They were sitting in silence when each experienced the same strange sensation, as if they were struggling to breathe, their chests feeling tight – a bit like being strangled by an invisible hand. It eventually wore off and they both looked at each other in amazement before driving away quickly. Subsequently, they did some research and found that “in the olden days they used to hang slaves all round that area, [and] that’s why it’s called Ruskington Horrors”.³ This last sentence must post-date 1998, because Richard Madeley coined the name ‘The Ruskington Horror’ on *This Morning*.

MAYBE A HIGHWAYMAN

One night in 2003 around 10pm Joe Pell was driving home with a friend down the A15

towards Sleaford when he saw a human-like shape on the side of the road to his right. He looked at it for a good 10 seconds until he passed it. It looked like a fairly tall man and was just standing there motionless; he thinks it had its back to him because he didn’t get sight of its face and it didn’t seem to notice him at all. He found the figure “very freaky”. The subjective impression he got, based on pictures he had seen in books and films, was that it was a highwayman, with a long cloak and

a hood. He emphasised that he hadn’t heard anything at all about ‘The Ruskington Horror’ and this particular stretch of road when he saw the figure. At the time he just thought it rather odd to see such a figure on the road at that time of night.⁴

MINI SIGHTINGS

Ruth Roper Wylde collected the following story⁵ and has highlighted that “some [incidents] have happened as recently as 2018.”⁶ In October 1999 a witness drove his Mini along the desolate roads around Evedon (roughly five miles [8km] from the focal site) followed by his parents in their car. He found the journey uneventful, but when they arrived home in Ruskington his mother rushed to tell him that they had seen someone walking alongside the road, and that they had then watched their son drive right through him. They thought he had hit somebody, but then realised it couldn’t be a real person. A few days later the witness went to visit a friend and drove down the same road. Someone jumped out in front of the car making him brake and swerve into a ditch. He got out of the car but there was no one there.

The following Christmas Eve the witness allowed his friend to drive the Mini and they found themselves on the same stretch of road. This time the Mini cut out and they



had to pull over. They tried to start the engine again, but thought they could smell burning. They leaped out of the car and scrambled up the road just as the car burst into flames. The fire service found a rational explanation for the fire but not for the breakdown itself. Though these incidents took place a few miles from the focal site, they possibly suggest recurrent phenomena in the broader area.

RAF PHANTOM

'Louie' contacted the *Anything Ghost* podcast about her brother's experience around 2015.⁷ His work necessitated considerable long-distance travel across the UK. One night after a tiring drive he was heading to his parents' Lincolnshire home, as his appointment the next day was nearby. He was on "the last stretch" near Sleaford – a quiet, dead-straight road surrounded by flat fields. Suddenly his headlights caught a figure stepping into the road with a hand up, as if flagging him to stop. The man wore an old-fashioned, long police coat. The witness thought it must be someone official from the nearby RAF base, but in a flash the figure was gone. Having slowed down, he continued on his way, but had been taken aback by the event. He assumed he was more tired than he had

thought, and promptly forgot the experience when he arrived at his parents' house. However, next day he mentioned the encounter to colleagues, who asked where it had happened. He told them he was on the A15 near Ruskington. They all went quiet and looked at each other, before one said he had seen 'The Ruskington Horror'. The brother had not heard about the phenomenon (so suggestion was out of the question), and despite having grown up nearby, neither had 'Louie'.

MIDDLE OF THE ROAD GHOST

On 19 February 2016 'AxfellRogue', a Ruskington resident, posted on the online Fortean Forums concerning an incident that had befallen them that very evening.⁸ They had a 6pm appointment at Cranwell Village, nearly five miles away, and set off late around 5.50pm. Turning left on the A15 towards Sleaford and travelling a little over the speed limit they were on the straight stretch of road towards the Cranwell turn off (about one mile south of the focal site). It was dark, and when starting to brake they saw someone crossing the road, and so braked harder to allow plenty of time for them to get to the other side. But the black, masculine-looking figure stopped just across the centre line. Vehi-

cles were approaching from the opposite direction and the figure was silhouetted against the oncoming headlights, but did not move. Then, at the point when an oncoming van would have hit the figure, the vehicle's front headlight on the driver's side went out. This totally freaked out the witness, who admitted to having shivers from head to toe just thinking about it.

WITNESS TESTIMONIES

As mentioned above, I received eight witness responses relating specifically to the Ruskington area and set them out below. It will be noted that three pre-date *This Morning*, but were not submitted to the programme (or at least were not used on it), which suggests that the people concerned found their experiences so challenging that they have stayed with them to this day. I would like to express my thanks to Garry Ross of Lincs Paranormal Research Group,⁹ and his colleagues, who responded with details from their own long-term researches into the phenomena, and kindly dealt with some of my queries. They are not a 'ghost hunting' group; Garry and his colleague Clare are on the National Register of Professional Investigators with ASSAP¹⁰ and adhere to its code of ethics.



ABOVE: The stretch of the A15 approaching the Leasingham turn-off where 'Mrs K' saw an unusual misty cloud in the middle of the road.

A CURIOUS CLOUD

One Thursday evening in September 2019 at around 8.15pm Mrs K was driving home from her work in Sleaford, north along the A15. It had been a long day, but she wasn't overly tired. The road and surrounding area were damp because of the earlier rain, which had now stopped. She was travelling at around 40mph (64km/h) and approaching the B1209 right turn into Leasingham, near a large house on the left. Because the road from there is long and quite straight she decided to call her daughter on her hands-free mobile. It was then that she saw a localised misty cloud hanging right in the centre of the road. It was white, circular and dense, but transparent in places; Mrs K estimates that it was around 12ft (3.6m) wide and 10ft (3m) high. When her daughter answered the call Mrs K was driving through the cloud – which wasn't very deep as Mrs K passed through it quite quickly – and naturally told her daughter about what was happening to her at that moment. As the cloud was large and stationary they joked about it being a vape (from an electronic cigarette). Mrs K has never experienced a cloud like it before; she knows areas on this road where mist can form from water courses in the right weather conditions, but this was not one of them; and it wasn't smoke, as there was no smell to the cloud. She didn't notice any other cars passing at the time.

In late October when Mrs K was telling a group of people about her strange experience one of them, a pilot, suggested that the cloud was 'radiation fog'. Radiation fog usually occurs in the winter, aided by clear skies and calm conditions. The cooling of land overnight by thermal radiation cools the air close to the surface. This reduces the ability of the air to

SHE SAW A LOCALISED MISTY CLOUD HANGING RIGHT IN THE CENTRE OF THE ROAD

hold moisture, allowing condensation and fog to occur.¹⁰ This is obviously a rare occurrence and the pilot suggested that it usually happens after rain, if a road is colder than the surrounding area and the temperature is "just right". Is this the answer? It sounds plausible, given that the road was damp from earlier rain, but the event took place in September rather than the winter, and it was only 8.15pm (British Summer Time) rather than 'overnight'. Also, what Mrs K encountered was quite well-defined and localised; in addition, this is a road she had travelled for the past 17 years and she had never seen a similar phenomenon in all that time; it seems reasonable to assume that radiation fog would reappear in certain locations when the required weather circumstances reoccur. Mrs K has looked at photos of radiation fog and accepts that there are similarities with what she saw, but her cloud was denser and had clearer edges (which could possibly reflect a different stage of a radiation fog's formation). Given the proximity of where this happened to the locations associated with 'The Ruskington Horror' it is perhaps surprising that the possible contribution of radiation fog to witnesses' experiences has not been suggested before.

GHOSTLY HORSE AND CARRIAGE

At 3am one morning around October 2013, Jonathan was driving his truck from Sleaford to Lincoln along the A15. It was pitch black, but the weather was dry. He went through the S-bend in the road near Leasingham when a white, translucent silhouetted figure of a horse and carriage crossed the road in front of him from right to left. It was travelling quite fast and he could not make out its driver. But then it was gone. It hadn't shown up in the headlights and Jonathan hadn't braked; he just carried on driving. He suddenly felt very cold, and had a weird sensation all the way back through Lincoln to Brigg.

In the summer of 2018 he did regular work driving back and forth between RAF Cranwell and Lincoln along the A15. The weather would generally be dry, but not too warm, and his routine had him travelling northwards in the late afternoon (4.30-5pm). It was then that he would experience intense cold chills through his body and face; there would be a tingling and his face would go numb. This happened over 20 times and was almost a daily occurrence. The intensity of the sensations would vary – sometimes they would be very strong – as would his location on the A15 when they started. However, they always began to fade when he passed RAF Waddington, four miles (6km) south of Lincoln. Jonathan says that there was something almost spiritual about these experiences, but no matter how many times he tried to rationalise what happened to him he could not identify any likely cause, medical or otherwise.

UNCANNY COLLISION

On a Sunday evening in October 1994 Mr G left his home in Sleaford to travel north up

the A15 to visit his girlfriend in Ashby de la Launde. He was on his own, feeling happy and relaxed. The weather was dry and, although it was dark, visibility was good. There were a few cars on the road, but it was not busy. It was about 8.15pm and he was travelling at around 50-60mph (80-96km/h) when he came to the dip in the road between the Cranwell and Ruskington junctions. Suddenly, he heard and felt his Montego Estate hit something in the road. He thought that he had hit a deer – he could tell from the strength of the bump that whatever it was it was bigger than a fox or a hare, but not as big as a horse. He had the impression that it came across the road from right to left, but nothing appeared in the car's headlights. The collision felt as though it was straight in front of the car, although the car did not change direction. Mr G slowed down but didn't stop, as it wasn't safe to do so, particularly as it was dark. As the car was still driveable he continued on to Ashby. On arrival, he inspected the car and, much to his surprise, found that there was no damage. The next day he drove back to the site of the 'collision' to see if there was an animal in the ditch at the side of the road, but there was nothing. He cannot explain what happened but is certain that there was no element of suggestion, as at the time he was completely unaware of the various unusual sightings and experiences that would be reported in the following years.

PHANTOM HITCHHIKER

Sometime during the 1980s Rachel (pseudonym) was driving home from Sleaford to Wellingore. She was on her own returning from an evening with work colleagues. She hadn't consumed any alcohol as she was driving. At around 11pm she was travelling north up the A15 at around 45-50mph (64-80km/h), and had just passed the Ruskington turnoff. There was less traffic in those days and the road was deserted. Visibility was good, despite it being very dark. Then, before the



ABOVE: An example of radiation fog; could this be what Mrs K and others have seen on the A15?

left turn to the Brauncewell Quarries, she saw a man ahead of her in the middle of the road. She assumed he wanted a lift, but there was no way she was going to stop for a stranger at that time of night, and so she carried on driving. Understandably, she thought that the man would move out of the way when he realised that she wasn't going to stop – but he didn't. He just stood there and Rachel says that it felt like she drove right through him. But there was no bump or thud. She couldn't believe that she hadn't slowed down or stopped.

Over the following days Rachel checked and to her relief found that no accident had been reported. Consequently, she rationalised that the man had jumped out of the way at the last second. Rachel is sceptical about the paranormal and thought at the time that she had simply nearly run someone down.

This bothered her for many months after the event; but it was many years later in 1998, while on holiday in Scotland, that she watched the *This Morning* programme about *The Ruskington Horror* and realised other people had experienced similar events. This caused her to reflect that what happened to her might be weirder than she had thought at the time.

THE GREY MAN

It was around 9.30pm one dark, cold, clear winter's night in 2007 when Jean Cockerill (pseudonym) was returning home to Lincoln from a teaching assignment in Boston. There were few cars on the road and she was alone in her Toyota 4x4, listening to Radio 4, as she headed up the A15 to the Ruskington turnoff. She crested the hill on to the straight stretch of road, at a speed of around 50mph (80km/h), when she caught sight in her headlights of a figure on the left-hand verge.

It was a bareheaded man dressed in grey, wearing a jacket roughly the same colour as his trousers, walking with his back to her. He had shaggy, slightly unkempt hair, and was of a medium, slightly stocky build; Jean got the impression that he was youngish, perhaps in his mid-twenties. He wasn't carrying anything. But then, after perceiving him to be safely off the road, Jean suddenly found him right next to the car – so close that she was frightened that she might hit him. She swerved quite violently, as the man seemed so incredibly close – almost as if he were right next to the passenger window. Yet the man had not reacted to the car at all. Jean felt a real jolt of shock, frightened that she had come so close to hitting someone. She slowed right down and looked back in her mirror, but there was no one there.

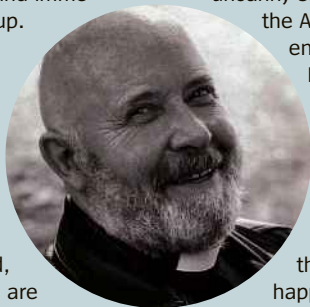
Understandably, Jean was shaken by what happened. She could not comprehend how she had not seen the man move to get so close to her car. For some time afterwards, when making the same journey, she would check



ABOVE: Fields now cover the lost village of Dunsby – but was it really a 'plague village' (like Brauncewell to the north), as local lore suggests, or just a small settlement that suffered gradual depopulation over time?

LIONEL FANTHORPE ON THE RUSKINGTON HORROR

I was in the *This Morning* studio when Kevin Whelan called and described his remarkable experience. Richard Madeley was completely energised and immediately decided to follow it up. Kevin's encounter is a good example of the surprising number of ghosts reported on roads. The paranormal mysteries of the A15 near Ruskington in Lincolnshire are among the strangest and most widely reported by reliable witnesses. Weird, ethereal, humanoid images are described as filling the landscape. On other occasions, seemingly real men and women cross the road in front of a driver who brakes hard and swerves



to avoid them – but there is no further sign of these figures. What can possibly account for the persistent reports of uncanny sightings associated with the A15? Are these phenomena traditional ghosts as Dickens describes them? Are they inadvertent time travellers? Have they slid into our cosmos from some unknown parallel universe? What is it about this stretch of road that makes these episodes happen?

For Lionel's strangest personal experience, see this month's 'It Happened to Me' section on p74.

hedge) and dashed in front of the car. It was caught in the headlights and ran across the road in a diagonal direction down towards Brauncewell, seemingly oblivious to the vehicle. Isobel couldn't make out the features, but knew it was a male and the size of an adult. His torso was arched forward as he ran. She just remembers him being very dark grey in colour, like a shadow, and can still readily see him in her mind's eye.

All four people in the car saw the figure and immediately thought that there might have been an accident. They turned the car around to see if anyone needed any help, but they found nothing and no sign of the man. Isobel thought no more about this incident until the 'Ruskington Horror' stories were publicised in the 1990s.

WHAT IS GOING ON?

I don't think that there can be any doubt that there is some sort of phenomenon happening at the focal site on the A15 and surrounding area, particularly given the number and nature of witness experiences. Many witnesses were genuinely terrified. However, it bears pointing out that the couple of dozen events that I have described in these two articles stretch over a period of broadly 30 years – which is less than one a year. There will inevitably be some under-reporting, but given the great nationwide publicity on *This Morning*, the strong response to my 'call' from across Lincolnshire, and the presence of a serious local Paranormal Research Group with its 'ear to the ground', I suspect that most occurrences will be known. Indeed, on *This Morning* Richard Madeley highlighted how well-known the hauntings were locally and in local media, despite little awareness outside the region.

Sean Tudor suggested that one potential explanation of the phenomena might involve the several roadside poles on the hill where

that stretch of road for any trick of the light, a post or a tree that would have led her to believe that there was a figure in the road in front of her. She has never experienced anything else like this when driving and it made a lasting impression. She had believed that she was alone in having this type of encounter, until she found others on the Internet only a couple of years ago.

TAXI DRIVER

Garry Ross passed on a second-hand story he received. In the spring of 2003 a female taxi driver in her early 40s was driving north up the A15 towards Lincoln around 1am after dropping someone off in Sleaford.¹² She had just passed the Ruskington turn-off (and was therefore at the focal site) when a figure ran in front of her car. It looked straight at her, with an open mouth, as if screaming, and then vanished under the vehicle, although she felt no impact. She stopped and looked around, but saw nothing unusual. She was naturally terrified and telephoned the office, who telephoned the police. The police arrived but found nothing, and there were no impact marks anywhere on the car. The woman was so traumatised that the police drove her home (with one officer driving her taxi). She gave up her job the next day.

NOT HANGING AROUND

Garry picked up another second-hand story from a local newspaper journalist when discussing a possible commission. She told him that her editor had been travelling from Lincoln back to Sleaford and just before he got to the Ruskington turn-off "he saw something black like a bin bag floating from the right-hand side of the road and then in front of his car". Frightened, he put his foot down and didn't check to see what it was. It could have been anything – but it was at exactly the right spot.

CHRISTMAS CRACKER

It was back in the December of either 1988 or 1989 when Isobel (pseudonym) had journeyed from Sleaford to Lincoln with three work colleagues to indulge in some late-night Christmas shopping. It was a weekday and around 10pm when they were travelling back home along the A15. The weather was cold but dry and it was dark. Everyone was in good spirits and was busy chatting; but no one had been drinking. Isobel sat in the back of the car. They were probably travelling at about 60mph (96km/h) when they passed the dip at the Brauncewell turning (on the right) and were on the upward gradient towards the turn-off left to Ruskington.

Suddenly a figure ran out from the field on the left (where there was a ditch and a

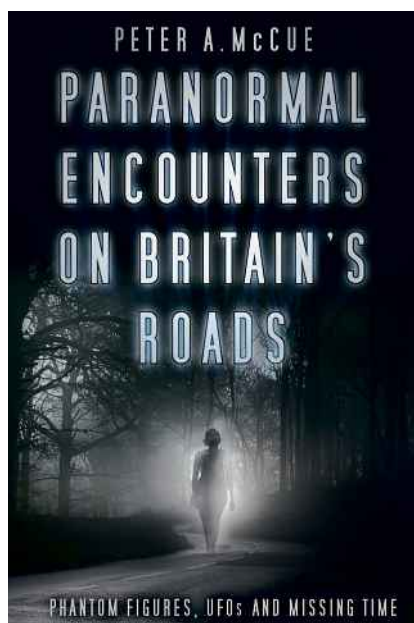


ABOVE: The 'haunted' stretch of the A15 near Ruskington is also something of a motoring 'black spot'.
FACING PAGE: FT contributor Peter McCue covers Ruskington in his study of Britain's haunted roads.

the Ruskington turn-off is situated on the A15, and that the forward motion of a vehicle can create the illusion of something moving in the road.¹³ He provides daytime photos and though the argument has plausibility it has to be remembered that most occurrences were at night and not on the brow of the hill where the junction is situated. That misperception can be involved is evidenced by an investigation by Garry Ross around 2018: a couple were travelling from Sleaford to Lincoln when they saw a 'face' peeping out from a hedge just after the main turn-off to Cranwell village. Garry drove out the following day and replicated their route. His conclusion was that they had seen some exposed bark from a tree in the bushes that resembled someone sticking their head out when seen from a distance. (This was also away from the focal site).

Garry has been looking into *The Ruskington Horror* for the best part of 16 years without coming to firm conclusions. He offered some thoughts on the *This Morning* programmes, having re-watched related videos "hundreds of times". I agree with him that the exact location of the sightings isn't always clear from the broadcasts, and he emphasises that anyone not local could easily think some occurred a bit further south than the focal site. He casts doubt on Dunsby being a plague village; the *Historic England* reference does not mention the plague and states that it "gradually depopulated" from the 13th century, rather than all residents being struck down with the plague and the site then being razed.¹⁴ After the dissolution of the monasteries the remaining tenants were evicted and the land used for sheep rearing; most buildings were demolished, except for the manor house, which was occupied until the Civil War. Subsequently the standing ruins were dismantled. Garry believes that there may have been some confusion with Brauncewell, further north, which *was* hit by the plague, with roughly a third of residents dying and the village being slowly abandoned over time.

One big issue with the *This Morning*



programme is the fact that as soon as the researchers went to Lincolnshire the Knights Templar preceptory of Temple Bruer became their main focus of attention. This was not mentioned by Kevin Whelan or any of the other witnesses quoted. Garry and his colleagues have never heard of anything paranormal happening at Temple Bruer apart from a few people going there with candles who said they "picked up" on the ghosts of old knights dressed in white. However, from the perspective of having good, interesting and entertaining television, I suspect that having a Knights Templar building in reasonably close proximity to the focal site was something of a gift. I am personally always very wary when mediums are used on television, although Shirley Wallace was convincing in her sincerity, as was Julian the dowser. Therefore, like all good fortunetellers, I keep an open mind about these aspects of the programme.¹⁵ But it is important to stress that, in any case, none of these events detracts from the witness statements.

The stretch of the A15 around the Rusk-

ington turn-off is undoubtedly something of a motoring 'black spot'¹⁶ and it is worth noting that many of the witnesses admitted to travelling at a tad above the speed limit. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that driving fast down a long, monotonous, undulating road with flat fields either side, and occasional trees and hedges breaking the headlight beams at night-time, can be quite mesmeric and disorientating, particularly if the driver is tired. To the north and south of the focal site there are sharp bends with 'Reduce Speed Now' markings meant to make drivers become more alert; perhaps they become 'over alert', making them take in more information from the environment than they usually do,¹⁷ with consequential images created by pareidolia from the passing landscape. After all, all drivers keep the possibility of something appearing in the road ahead at the back of their minds. That hypnagogic hallucinations could be a factor cannot be excluded either, although several sightings involved multiple witnesses.

So I return to my initial question. Is there something in this type of landscape, with its low-lying panorama and frequent mists, that somehow induces psychological reactions? The answer must be 'yes'. But, as Shirley Wallace suggested on *This Morning*, perhaps the traveller's state of mind plays a crucial role – and if so, does it create hallucinations, or does it perceive external paranormal phenomena that are already present? Which of the two is at play in the case of 'The Ruskington Horror' is, of course, impossible to determine.

My thanks to all the witnesses who responded, and particular thanks to Garry Ross and his colleagues at Lincs Paranormal Research Group. I would also like to thank Richard Madeley for his suggestions and advice in the early stages of my research.

➡ **ROB GANDY** is a Visiting Professor at Liverpool Business School, Liverpool John Moores University and a regular contributor to FT. A lifelong fortuneteller, he has eclectic interests in all things weird, including phantom hitchhikers, ghosts, strange sports and folk customs, time slips and synchronicities.

NOTES

- 1 www.lincolnshirelive.co.uk/news/local-news/haunted-stretch-lincolnshire-road-left-3455381
- 2 www.paranormaldatabase.com/reports/road-data.php
- 3 www.bbc.co.uk/lincolnshire/unexplained/your_sightings_3.shtml (no date given but the webpage was archived on 24 Sept 2014).
- 4 Joe Pell, Aug 2003, <https://forums.fortean.org/index.php?threads/a15-lincolnshire-road-ghost-ruskington-sleaford.39784/>

- 5 Ruth Roper Wylde, *The Roadmap of British Ghosts*, 2018, pp169-172.
- 6 www.lincolnshirelive.co.uk/news/local-news/there-something-spot-ghostly-2402525
- 7 https://anything-ghost.libsyn.com/ag266_2020mar21mp3; *Anything Ghost Show #266 – The Ruskington Horror, A Cemetery Ghost Followed Me Home, the Suicide Ghost and Other True Ghost Stories*. 22 Mar 2020.
- 8 AxellRogue 19 Feb 2016, [https://forums.fortean.org/index.php?threads/a15-lincoln-](https://forums.fortean.org/index.php?threads/a15-lincolnshire-road-ghost-ruskington-sleaford.39784/)

shire-road-ghost-ruskington-sleaford.39784/

- 9 www.lincsptr.com/about-us.htm
- 10 www.assap.ac.uk/
- 11 www.metoffice.gov.uk/weather/learn-about/weather/types-of-weather/fog/types-of-fog
- 12 The story was told to Garry by the woman who was working at the control desk of Newlands Taxis at the time of the incident. The witness claimed she hadn't been speeding at the time. Garry never got to interview her, but the police confirmed that the incident had happened.

The police also confirmed that they had received several similar reports over the years. More details are provided in Peter McCue's book *Paranormal Encounters on Britain's Roads*, The History Press, 2018, p60.

13 Sean Tudor, *The Ghosts of Bluebell Hill & other Road Ghosts*, White Ladies Press, 2017, p387.

14 <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1018395>

15 Garry Ross looked into whether a young motorcyclist had been killed when his red Honda crashed, causing severe leg injuries

(possibly the same accident quoted by Kevin Whelan; see last issue). Unfortunately he could find no evidence for such an incident.

16 www.lincolnshirelive.co.uk/news/local-news/a15-crash-police-cranwell-pictures-4051252; www.lincolnshirelive.co.uk/news/local-news/live-updates-crash-a15-a17-3710626.

17 I discussed potential physiological and psychological explanations for such experiences in **FT328:32-39**.

THE EDINBURGH CASTLE MYSTERY

According to Edinburgh Castle's tour guides, the skeleton of a newborn baby was once found hidden in the walls of the Royal Palace – was it a mysterious sacrifice or evidence that a Royal changeling had ascended the throne? **JAN BONDESON** attempts to uncover the truth.

In Victorian times, the tour guides at Edinburgh Castle had quite a startling story to tell. In 1830, a coffin had been found immured in one of the walls of the Royal Palace: it contained the skeleton of a new-born babe, wrapped in a velvet cloth embroidered with the letters 'JR'. Since it was well known that Mary Queen of Scots had given birth to the future James VI in these very apartments, this extraordinary discovery would imply that the true child of Mary had died in infancy, and that the little prince was a changeling introduced into the royal crib. Various conspiracy theorists have speculated that the Earl and Countess of Mar donated their second son to act the part of the little prince, or that an empty crib had been lowered from the Castle using a long rope, to be filled with a healthy child purchased for a few shillings in one of the dens in the Cowgate; in contrast, the mainstream historians have shunned the story as a fabrication, invented by the tour guides to astound their credulous Cockney visitors.

Interestingly, some research demonstrates that the story of the 'Edinburgh Castle Mystery' has more truth behind it than previously presumed. The Archives of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland hold some very interesting early documents concerning this mysterious matter. At the meeting of 14 February 1831 was read an account by Captain JE Alexander of the "discovery in the wall of the ancient Palace of the Castle of Edinburgh, of the remains of a child, which were wrapped in a shroud of Silk and Cloth of Gold, having the letter J embroidered thereupon". A rib and some other bones from the child were presented to the Society by the Reverend James Chapman of Edinburgh



LEFT: Edinburgh Castle today.
FACING PAGE: Mary Queen of Scots in a 19th century print, after JB Wandesforde.

not mention either coffin or bones, but instead includes a portion of the shroud in which the remains of the infant had been wrapped, donated by Captain Alexander. This item has since been lost.³

Since there is also mention of the mysterious discovery at Edinburgh Castle in a contemporary newspaper, the *Glasgow Courier* of 14 August 1830, there is good reason to believe that on 11 August 1830, a wooden box containing bones presumed to be human really was found in the Royal Apartments at

Edinburgh Castle. Portions of coffin, shroud and bones were taken as souvenirs by several of the military men; some of these exhibits ended up with the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, who lost or discarded them long ago. Several of the accounts mention that the shroud was embroidered with the letter 'J' or 'T'; some people thought they could also see an 'R'.

A HOLE IN THE WALL

The account of the discovery in the *Glasgow Courier* is worth giving in full: "On Wednesday last, as the masons were knocking off the loose lime, previous to re-casting the old palace in the Castle, they discovered a hole in the wall. The workmen described it as being three feet and a half long [107cm], one foot two inches [36cm] high and one foot [30cm] in breadth. Between the end of the opening and the surface of the wall (it is the front of the palace) there was a stone about six inches [15cm] thick and about the same length which was supposed, from the thickness of the wall, to be between the extremity of the

THE MAINSTREAM HISTORIANS HAVE SHUNNED THE STORY AS A FABRICATION INVENTED BY GUIDES

Castle at the same meeting. Part of the shroud, having the letter J embroidered on it, and belonging to Mr D'Alton of the 71st Highland Light Infantry, was exhibited.¹ In a letter dated 16 July 1831, Sergeant Major Dingwall, late of the Scots Greys, sent a part of the coffin and some bones to the Society, adding the valuable detail that they had been found on 11 August 1830.² The 1849 catalogue of the Society's museum does





EDINBURGH CASTLE, FROM THE GRASS MARKET.



PALACE COURTYARD
EDINBURGH CASTLE. 624 R.P. PHILLIMORE

PALACE COURTYARD.
used for centuries
the stronghold of
the Kings & Queens
of Scotland.
The door in the od-
agonal tower leads
to the crown room.
The door on the
right leads to the
room in which
Mary of Guise died
in 1566. Here also
is the birth room
of James VI.

MARY OF GUISE MARY QUEEN OF SCOTS



ROOM IN EDINBURGH CASTLE IN WHICH JAMES VI WAS BORN R.P. PHILLIMORE 426

THE DUNGEONS OF THE CASTLE R.P. PHILLIMORE

ABOVE LEFT: An unmarked cabinet card of Edinburgh Castle from the Grassmarket. ABOVE CENTRE AND RIGHT: The Palace Courtyard, the room where James VI was born and the Castle dungeons in postcards by noted postcard artist RP Phillimore. BELOW: Edinburgh Castle at sunset in another postcard by Phillimore.

opening and the inner surface of the wall or room. In this cavity was found several human bones, some pieces of oak supposed to have been parts of a coffin, and bits of woollen cloth, in all probability the lining of it. On the lining the letter J was distinctly visible, and some of the masons said they saw the letter G also. The bones appear to have been those of a young child. Some of them are in the possession of the person from whom we received this communication. It is right to add that the opening was *across* the wall.”⁴

One would have thought that such a remarkable discovery, near the room where Mary Queen of Scots had given birth to her son and heir back in 1566, would have been given widespread attention, but this was not the case. In 1832, Charles Mackie’s guidebook to Edinburgh Castle placed the discovery of the coffin at the wall between the Crown Room and the west entrance into the square; he improved on the story to claim that the coffin had contained the bones of a child and fragments of velvet with the initials JR, preserved by the officers of the 71st regiment, who were then stationed at the Castle.⁵ The next writer to comment on the Castle Mystery was the antiquary Daniel Wilson, whose 1848 account is worth quoting in full: “In making some repairs to the west front at the royal apartments in the year 1830, a remarkably curious and interesting discovery was made. Nearly in a line with the crown-room, and about six feet [183cm] from the pavement of the quadrangle, the wall was observed, when struck, to sound hollow, as though a cavity existed at that place. It was accordingly opened from the outside, when a recess was discovered, measur-

“THE REMAINS OF A CHILD INCLOSED IN AN OAK COFFIN, EVIDENTLY OF GREAT ANTIQUITY”

ing about two feet six inches [76cm] by one foot [30cm], and containing the remains of a child, inclosed in an oak coffin, evidently of great antiquity and very much decayed. The remains were wrapped in a cloth, believed to be woollen, very thickly wove, so as to resemble leather; and within this were the decayed fragments of a richly embroidered silk covering, with two initials wrought upon it, one of them distinctly marked I. This interesting discovery was reported at the time to

Major General Thackeray RE, by whose orders they were again restored to their strange place of Sepulture, where they still remain. It were vain now to attempt a solution of this mysterious discovery, though it might furnish a novelist with material on which to found a thrilling romance.”⁶ When Wilson’s *Memorials of Edinburgh* was issued in a new edition in 1891, the section about the discovery of the coffin was retained without change, including the part about the coffin and bones being re-interred in the wall, which is certainly erroneous since there is contemporary evidence that many bones, as well as fragments of wood and cloth, were taken as souvenirs, some of them ending up in the repository of the Society of Antiquaries.

Fast forward 40 years, with no worthwhile attention given to the Castle Mystery, until the London *Morning Post* retold the story in 1888, adding some further inaccuracies as it went along: Sassenach journalists picked the wrong Edinburgh royal palace, placing the mystery at Holyrood and not at the Castle! When the *Scotsman* newspaper ponderously corrected this mistake, some interesting correspondence came to light. In particular, a certain Mr PH



M'Kerlie FSA Scot wrote that the story was not some invention by the Castle tour guides but founded on solid fact. The oak coffin with the remains of a child had been found "in the front wall, Royal apartments square, Edinburgh Castle, nearly in line with the Crown Room, about five or six feet [152-182cm] above the floor, in the apartment occupied by the messman..." Several officers and soldiers from the garrison had taken care of some bones and fragments of coffin, as well as the cloth, said to be silk, on which two letters had been embroidered, one of them a 'T' or 'J'. Being a lad at the time, M'Kerlie was given some of the bones for his collection of curiosities. The inevitable sceptic wrote to the *Scotsman*, saying that M'Kerlie was a credulous fool since "he believed the story which it is understood the Castle guides occasionally venture to palm upon the credulous Cockney tourist that the remains found in the mysterious chamber in the wall were those of the real James VI. These lead up to the conundrum, who was the other fellow that actually occupied the Throne?" M'Kerlie remained adamant, however, that the story was nothing but fact, although the bones he had got for his private museum had disappeared long ago.⁷

In 1907, after a London newspaper had briefly discussed the Castle Mystery, several correspondents to *Notes & Queries* debated the veracity of the story, some believing that Mary Queen of Scots had given birth to a stillborn child, the remains of which had been immured in the wall, to be replaced in the crib by the offspring of a soldier's wife. More than one of them had heard such a story from the castle guides. A sceptic rightly concluded that there was nothing to link the discovery of the remains with Mary Queen of Scots or with her little son and speculated that the bones were those of some animal walled up to ward off evil spirits. Another correspondent wrote to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, and to the Royal Engineers Institute, but without finding out anything new or interesting.⁸ In 1909, the antiquary Walter B Woodgate reviewed the old story of the coffin in the wall and swallowed it hook, line and sinker. Since he thought James VI very much resembled the Earl of Mar, he suggested that the child of the Countess of Mar had been substituted for the stillborn little prince immured in the wall.⁹

In 1918, the story was given careful consideration by the dowager Lady Forbes. She reasoned that the murder of Rizzio at Holyrood, in front of the eyes of the pregnant Mary Queen of Scots, surely must have induced a



LEFT: A portrait of James VI at the age of 12 by Arnold Bronckorst.

the son of Mary Queen of Scots. He simply had to be a changeling, probably of common origin due to his boorish manner.¹³ Finally, in 1944, a mystery man who called himself 'Frank Gent' wrote a very able review of the controversy about the Edinburgh Castle Mystery, quoting all previous writers at length, and locating the original reports of the discovery in the *Edinburgh Advertiser* and the *Glasgow Courier*.¹⁴ He got no closer to solving the mystery, however, and, since there was a war on, his contribution was largely ignored.

BONES OF CONTENTION

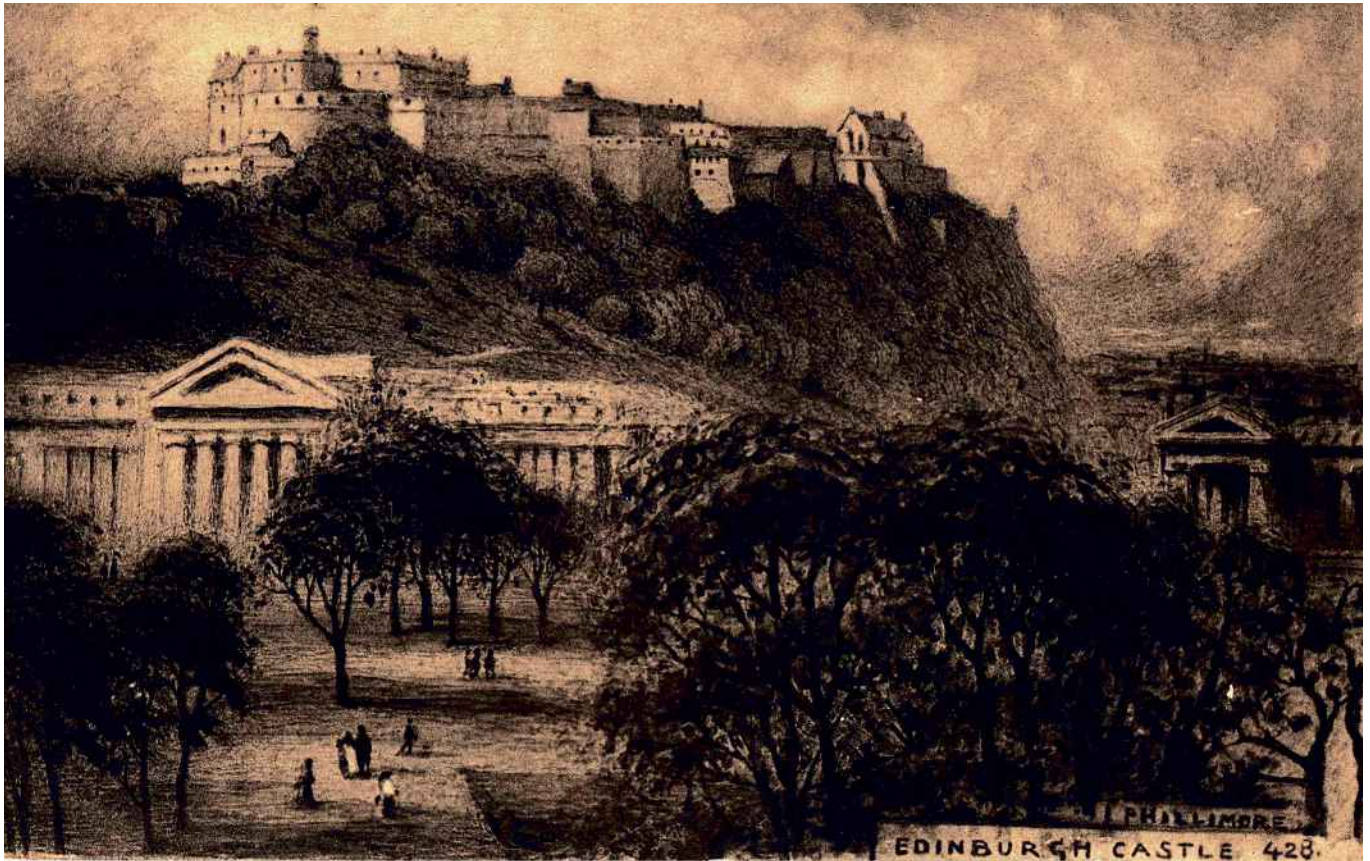
Eschewing the flights of fancy quoted earlier, the solid facts remain that in 1830, a number of bones were found hidden inside a wall at the royal apartments in Edinburgh Castle. It is possible, albeit not conclusively proven, that these bones had been placed in some kind of wooden container, like a box or a chest. One of the bones, said to have resembled a rib, was handed over to the Society of Antiquar-

fearful 'maternal impression', weakening the little prince until he would become incapable of extrauterine life. She speculated that Lady Reres, a middle-aged lady of the court who appears to have been some kind of royal wet-nurse, had given birth at about the same time as Mary, and that a group of conspirators got rid of the body of the stillborn little prince, and put young Reres in the royal crib in his stead, without Mary's knowledge.¹⁰ Commenting on her Ladyship's lucubrations, Professor RK Hannay pointed out that there was nothing to suggest that Lady Reres was pregnant at the time, and wondered why, if the conspirators wanted the dead little prince to disappear for good, they took the trouble to embroider 'JR' (for Jacobus Rex) on his silken shroud.¹¹

Writing in 1929, the antiquary Grant R Francis made a novel suggestion: "It does not appear unlikely, however, that the so-called 'coffin' was merely a reliquary wrapped in part of a vestment, that the 'skeleton' was the relic, and that the whole was hidden during the Reformation after Mary's departure from Edinburgh." Although he admitted that James VI and the second Earl of Mar resembled each other, there was nothing to suggest that James VI was any other person than the son of Henry Darnley and Mary Queen of Scots.¹² In rebuttal, the antiquary K Heanley reasoned that James VI's repulsive appearance, disgraceful conduct and contemptible cowardice rendered it impossible that he was

ies. Since it is an established fact in forensic medicine that after the disposal of a body or a skeleton, the bones remaining the longest are the skull, the pelvis and the vertebral column, the bones found at Edinburgh Castle are highly unlikely to have represented an entire skeleton, either human or animal: if a rib had survived intact, so would the skull and pelvis, of which no contemporary mention was made.

A more difficult problem to address is what the bones were doing in the Castle wall in the first place. Already, back in 1907, there was a suggestion that they represented a construction sacrifice: some animal had been immured alive when the royal apartments were built in the late 15th century, in order to provide good luck and drive off evil spirits. This theory would have received support if it had been established that such inhumane practices were current among the Scots of the late Middle Ages, when erecting buildings intended for the highest in the land. Moreover, the animals immured in construction sacrifices tend to become mummified rather than to just deteriorate into a collection of bones. The walling-up of a collection of human or animal bones would have had no folkloric significance as a construction sacrifice. Then we have Grant R Francis's suggestion that the box of bones was a reliquary; this hypothesis would explain much that otherwise would have been obscure, had it been possible to explain why a valuable reliquary



ABOVE: Edinburgh Castle, in a postcard by RP Phillimore.

would be wantonly immured. Mr Francis's idea that it had to do with the Reformation would have received useful support if other relics had been found hidden in such a manner at the time; for a devout Roman Catholic, it would have been sacrilege to treat a holy object with such disrespect. And a reliquary typically contains just one bone or other relic, not a number of them. There is of course the possibility that, fearful of John Knox and his fanatical followers, some desperate Catholic might have emptied all the Castle reliquaries into a single box and walled the holy bones up inside the royal apartments; but again, this would have been sacrilegious behaviour. Thirdly and finally, there is, of course, also the possibility of some frolicsome young officers hiding the box of bones in the wall beforehand, as a hoax – but this would require a triple-alliance of superior historical knowledge, good access to bones from some ossuary, and a perverted sense of humour in setting up such a pointless charade. The Edinburgh Castle Mystery is a mystery still, albeit one unlikely to have any royal involvement.

It is hereby argued that the importance of the bones in the wall at Edinburgh Castle has been vastly exaggerated by imaginative writers; in reality, we do not even know whether they were of human or animal origin, and there is nothing to connect them with Mary Queen of Scots. Of the amateur historians discussing the mystery, some have gone into extravagant discussions of changelings on the throne, but Queen Mary surely must

have been aware whether her newborn son was alive or dead, and it is not compatible with what is known of her character that she would willingly have played a role in such a charade. In all likelihood, James VI of Scotland, to become James I of England, was the son of Henry Darnley and Mary Stuart.¹⁵

This is an edited extract from Jan Bondeson's book Phillimore's Edinburgh (Amberley Publishing, Stroud 2018).

FOOTNOTES

1 *Archaeologia Scotica* App 4 [1857], p14 and App. 5 [1890], p6; Entry for 14 February 1831, Society of Antiquaries of Scotland Archive, National Museums Scotland Research Library, GB/587/SAS/Minutes.

2 Communication for 16 February 1831, f.272, Society of Antiquaries of Scotland Archive, National Museums Scotland Research Library, GB/587/SAS/Communications.

3 *Synopsis of the Museum of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1849), p100; information from Ms Georgia Rogers, Library and Information Assistant, National Museums Scotland.

4 *Glasgow Courier*, Aug 14 1830.

5 C Mackie, *Historical Description of the Castle of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh, 1832), pp25-6.

6 D Wilson, *Memorials of Edinburgh in the Olden Time* (Edinburgh, 1848).

7 *Scotsman*, 7 June 1884, 20, 27, 31 Dec 1888; on M'Kerlie, see also EMH M'Kerlie, *Two Sons of Galloway* (Dumfries, 1928), pp139-40.

8 *TP's Weekly*, 30 Aug 1907; *Notes and Queries*

10s 8 [1907], p249, p333, pp492-3.

9 WB Woodgate, *Reminiscences of an Old Sportsman* (London, 1909), pp349-64.

10 A Forbes, *Scottish Historical Review* 15 [1918], 146-55 and *Cornhill Magazine* 13 [1923], pp665-669.

11 RK Hannay (*Scottish Historical Review* 15 [1918], 155-8).

12 GR Francis, *Scotland's Royal Line* (New York 1929), 53-61.

13 K Heaney, *Cornhill Magazine* 70 [1931] and GR Francis, *Cornhill Magazine* 71 [1931], pp232-43.

14 F Gent, *Chambers's Journal* 8s 13 [1944], pp451-5, pp545-9. This article was later reproduced as a pamphlet, which is today very rare, although the National Library of Scotland has a copy.

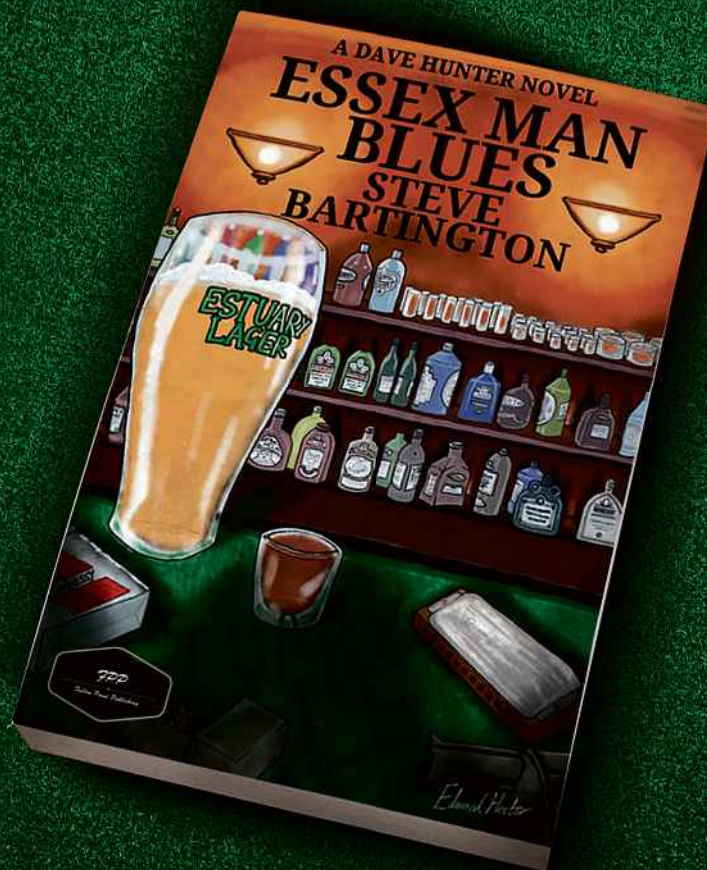
15 There are two recent biographies of James VI of Scotland and I of England, namely A Stewart, *The Cradle King* (London, 2003) and J Matusiak, *James I* (Stroud, 2015), although neither discusses the Castle Mystery; see also the articles by J Wormald (*History* 68 [1983], pp187-209), M Lee (*Albion* 16 [1984], pp151-63), AW Beasley (*Seventeenth Century* 10 [1995], pp151-62), MB Young (*Journal of British Studies* 51 [2012], pp540-67) and T Peters *et al.* (*History of Psychiatry* 23 [2012], pp277-90).

♦ **JAN BONDESON** is a retired senior lecturer and consultant physician at Cardiff University. He is a regular contributor to *FT* and the author of numerous books on fortaean subjects, including *The Lion Boy and Other Medical Curiosities* (2018), *Strange Victoriana* (2016), *Amazing Dogs: A Cabinet of Canine Curiosities* (2011) and *The Two-Headed Boy and Other Medical Marvels* (2000). His latest book is *Murder Houses of Edinburgh* (2020).



***Murder, Mystery, Blues, and Booze.
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***'Steve Bartington makes an assured debut'
-Record Collector-***



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THE TERRIBLE TURKMEN

In the second of his two journeys down the Silk Road, **SD TUCKER** pitches his caravan in the desert wastes of Turkmenistan, where both the history books and the record books are being rewritten daily by the ever-growing Central Asian cult of the strongman.

Last time we saw how, in the oil and gas-rich 'Stans of Central Asia, native unrest and the prospect of *jihad* was kept at bay by a burgeoning cult of the strongman, with post-Soviet dictators clinging onto power for decades by ruling with an iron fist and making the prospect of their absence appear unthinkable. But succession planning is a must if you don't want your 'Stan to collapse into chaos once you're gone. Dictatorial ideas for preventing such a fate have ranged from becoming immortal by drinking special yoghurt to turning yourself into a saint and forcing people to worship you after your death. Each 'Stan has its own special circumstances, meaning there are a variety of potential solutions to the age-old problem of what comes next after the national saviour snuffs it.

MEET THE NEW BOSS, SAME AS THE OLD BOSS

Another good idea when a strongman dies is to install a clone to serve in the original despot's place. Turkmenistan's current President, Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov, is falsely rumoured to be the illegitimate son of his esteemed predecessor Saparmurat Niyazov, such a chip off the old block does he seem. Ruling since 1985 and declared President for Life in 1999, Niyazov easily filled the post-Communist vacuum left by toppled statues of Marx and Lenin. Famously, Niyazov's own giant statue in the capital, Ashgabat, was made of gold (at least on the outside) and rotated to face the Sun, his outstretched arms guiding its rise and fall. Styling himself 'Turkembashi the Great', or 'The Great Father of All Turkmen', he renamed towns after himself, copying Leningrad, doing likewise with a meteorite, an airport, a mosque, several brands of consumer product and the entire month of January. He also put his dead mother Gurbansoltan Eje into dictionaries, replacing the native word for 'bread' with her name, before renaming April in her honour and planning a new eight-month year. He had already renamed the days of the week; Monday became 'Main Day' and Sunday 'Rest Day'. Only Friday escaped, for reasons unknown. New national holidays named after his favourite things in life, like 'Melon Day', also appeared. Claiming there was no native word for 'ketchup' he simply invented one, before reforming the entire alphabet.



HE BANNED CAR RADIOS, LONG HAIR, TOBACCO AND CIRCUSES



ABOVE: A golden statue of the late President Saparmurat Niyazov, which rotated to face the moving Sun. BELOW LEFT: Melon Day was one of the new national holidays introduced by President Niyazov.

Amused Western media printed stories about Turkmenbashi's misrule whenever possible, not always checking facts. It was widely reported he had made beards and gold teeth illegal, but this was not so. He simply expressed distaste for such things, meaning courtiers rushed to follow his example, sycophancy equalling success. Niyazov had no need to resort to passing laws to ensure a rush on shaving foam; this would have indicated a functioning legal system, so would actually have represented a form of democratic progress.

Nonetheless, it was reported Turkmenbashi did the following: banned lip-synching, car radios, long hair, tobacco, circuses, opera, ballet and other pet hates as "foreign" or "unnecessary"; expelled all dogs from the capital for their "unappealing odour"; prevented news anchors from wearing make-up, as he could no longer distinguish the men from the women; advised that Turkmen without dentists should chew bones like dogs ("Those of you whose teeth have fallen out did not chew on bones"); expelled foreign-educated doctors before replacing the

Hippocratic Oath with a pledge of allegiance to himself; and banned the diagnosis of several diseases so it would appear they did not exist. Squandering Turkmenistan's once vast petro-wealth, he issued decrees making all utilities, plus table salt, free for every citizen, equipped mountains with staircases and planned a desert palace made of ice so "our children can learn to ski". If water came out of your tap you received no bill, but as most was diverted to fill fountains and irrigate greenery in the 70 per cent desertified country's showpiece capital, his launch of the annual 'A Drop of Water is a Grain of Gold Day' seemed like mockery. Niyazov practised false modesty, claiming to be "ashamed" that music TV only ever played songs about him, and ordered a stamp-like image of his head that appeared at the top right of every show be removed – but if he really felt this way, why did he rename one TV channel 'The Epoch of Turkmenbashi'? Niyazov once lamented that "the people demand [such things] because of their mentality." Inhabiting a gold-domed palace, he wept that "all I wanted was a small, cosy house," but his adoring public would not allow it. Strangely, for one so beloved, Turkmenbashi wore a magic amulet as a tie-pin to combat the evil-eye. His subjects' primitive mentality was a conscious policy-decision. "Uneducated people are easier to govern," he let slip, which was why he reduced the years of children's schooling and closed the nation's libraries as "nobody reads books" – a real self-fulfilling prophecy. So unburdened by knowledge are today's Turkmen that, according to travel-writer Paul Theroux, some think US astronauts converted to Islam after hearing the Prophet Muhammad's voice giving the call to prayer on the Moon, NASA's most famous convert being, er, Louis Armstrong.¹

CRIMINAL RECORDS

Following Niyazov's 2006 death, his one-time deputy Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov has ruthlessly dismantled Turkmenbashi's personality cult by restoring traditional calendar names and tearing down the dictator's statues. Sadly, new statues of the former dentist Berdimukhamedov shot up instead, and he acquired the title 'Arkadag', or 'Protector of the People', spawning a second personality cult as bad as the first. One old hobby of Turkmenbashi's that Arkadag still maintains is harassing the Guinness Book of Records. In 2003, a cobbler named Erkin Nepesow 'spontaneously' decided to manufacture the world's largest shoe, 6.2m (20ft4in) long and 1.76m (5ft9in) high, as "a unique symbol of the great steps that Turkmenistan [was] taking in its Golden Age" under Niyazov. Arkadag has continued this tradition, hoping to net Turkmenistan the most world records on Earth, thereby allegedly making the country more appealing to foreign tourists. His chosen method is to



set records so obscure and absurdly specific that nobody else would ever even think of attempting them, such as: 'largest cycling awareness lesson', 'largest roof in the shape of a star', 'largest Ferris Wheel within an enclosed space', 'biggest flagpole in the world', 'largest image of a carpet depicted on a main passenger terminal at an airport' and 'biggest symbol of a horse'. Ashgabat also has the highest concentration of white marble-clad buildings in the world, but the record for 'most people allegedly evicted from their homes at a few hours' notice without compensation to make way for obscene architectural follies' has not yet been confirmed by Norris McWhirter. Although Guinness claim feats "must be interesting" to be included in their book, they also offer a marketing service which aims to polish tarnished brands by associating them with any new records deemed to be achievable for alleged fees of up to \$500,000, leading to criticism from Amnesty International.²

Again, stories can be exaggerated, but reportedly 'The Turkmenator', as he is known for his habit of dressing like an SAS soldier and firing guns in public, has also done the following: decreed all cars must be white,

ABOVE: Thousands of tracksuit-wearing officials stand in front of the 30m (98ft) monument honouring cycling to mark World Bicycle Day. LEFT: A golden equestrian monument to President Berdimukhamedov was unveiled in Ashgabat in 2015.

this being his lucky colour; played surprise rock concerts to stunned workers; lifted heavy gold-plated weights during Cabinet meetings; solved coronavirus (see FT394:53-54); performed successful cancer surgery; forced his Cabinet to participate in mass bike rides and fitness sessions; broken into impromptu song while visiting industrial facilities; won national car races; hit bullseyes with bullets from a strangely short range, something deemed "worthy of emulation by military servicemen"; developed the magnetic ability to attract hordes of dancing children; flown a helicopter and an aeroplane; forced officials to publicly confess to bizarre crimes such as stealing 30,000 buckets ("I just don't understand it. Why do you need 30,000 buckets?"); and employed special janitors to sift through old newspapers at recycling plants to ensure that nobody has "soiled" the President's image by wiping their bum on it as toilet-paper. With such unprecedented achievements to his name, it is no wonder the President won Turkmenistan's coveted 'Man of the Year' award in 2010. It must have been a brave man who beat him in all the others.³

MY LOVELY HORSE

Obsessed with the native Akhal-Teke breed of horses, in 2019 'The People's Horse-Breeder' released a *Father Ted*-like ode to his favourite steed, Rovach, including lyrics like "You are like the morning dawn/You are like a sacred form." Accompanied by his 14-year-old grandson on keyboard, Arkadag had his song put on TV, suspiciously edited in such a way that you couldn't quite tell whether it was really him playing the centrepiece guitar solo or not. Akhal-Teke horses are a revered



national symbol, and Berdymukhamedov is eager to associate himself with them at every opportunity, hence his authorship of books like *Akhal-Teke Horses – Our Pride and Glory* and *Flight of the Heavenly Race Horses*. A huge golden statue of Arkadag on horseback, together with a dove, strengthens this link, a replacement for Turkmenbashi's own former giant sculpture. The bird represents an iconic moment in Berdymukhamedov's rule, a 2011 equestrian show marking 'National Horse Day'. Here, seated on the back of his then-favourite mount Shagadam, the President trotted out onto a racecourse when, as reported by State media, "at that moment, a flock of doves as white as snow flew up to the sky. One of them smoothly descended to land on the shoulder of the leader of the nation, which for many peoples of the world from time immemorial has been perceived as a sign of the highest blessing, and this evoked the next storm of amazed applause – the head of the Turkmen State with a dove on his shoulder was seen as a symbol of the policy of peace-making that proceeds from our Fatherland, evoking in all of progressive humankind the most heartfelt and bright hopes for universal peace, harmony and prosperity."

Less well reported in State media were events on Horse Day 2013, when, just after winning the Turkmen Grand National, President Berdymukhamedov fell off his racehorse just after crossing the finishing line in first position and almost died beneath the other animals' hooves, like a male suffragette protesting against his own tyranny. Carted away in an ambulance, it seemed the daredevil Dear Leader was no more. For 30 minutes, silence reigned, with spectators bursting into tears. Then, abruptly, Arkadag reappeared, unharmed and wearing fancy dress, waving at the crowd, who clapped in profound relief.

Things then carried on as normal, as if nothing had happened – because, officially, *nothing had happened*. Journalists were corralled and told to delete all footage and images of the "sporting accident" as being of "no interest" to anybody at all, anywhere, ever. It must have been of some interest to at least one person, as film was successfully smuggled out anyway. One of Berdymukhamedov's acts on taking power was to reverse his predecessor's dread edict that the 'sacred oath' of the Turkmen, which stated that a man's tongue would shrivel and his hand fall off if he spoke ill of his Fatherland or its President, should not have to be recited every day, but saved only for "special occasions". Surely this must have been one of them? ⁴

INSPIRAL CARPETS

A central plank of President Niyazov's old cult was the pretence he was a great writer. The best local authors, promoted as intellectuals during Soviet times, were banned. Only Turkmenbashi could be a genius now. Niyazov's own ill-written work, the *Ruhnama*, or *Book of the Soul*, was often the only title besides the Koran to be found in bookshops. Copies were also displayed in mosques to make up for the latter's "shortcomings". Refusal could lead to demolition. Niyazov said he had written it in consultation with Allah, and that reading it thrice would get you into Heaven and "eliminate all shortcomings" in your person. Officials kept copies of the two-volume, 800-page "textbook of life" on their desks, citizens had to spend their Saturdays perusing it, and a 16-hour exam on its contents became part of driving tests, for "moral" reasons. Schools taught it, dropping "subjects of minor importance" like algebra, physics and PE, as part of the author's plot to de-educate the land. Science and history

were taught from the *Ruhnama* instead of real textbooks, telling kids ancient Turkmen invented wheels, robots and wheat. A giant mechanical version was installed in Ashgabat, opening its covers every night as a voice read passages aloud. TV showed disguised students reciting it in foreign languages to give the impression that the whole world was studying it. A copy was even blasted off to "conquer space".

The *Ruhnama* had its origins in a genuine academic project to record local ethnic folklore before it was lost forever, folkways having been suppressed under Communism. The paternalistic Niyazov thought that a good way to forge a cohesive post-Soviet national identity was to make the book "the centre of the Universe". Disliking the finished text, he hired some alcoholics to rewrite it, fictionally if need be. In 2001 Niyazov rewrote the final draft himself to imply he was personally descended from the semi-mythical father of all Turkmen, Oguz Khan (as well as the Prophet Muhammad, Noah and Alexander the Great), who had many of the country's geographical features named after himself, just as Turkmenbashi did. Niyazov's rambling pseudo-history keeps stopping abruptly for him to write an appalling poem or offer random advice like "Wear clean and decent clothes"; "The Turkmen does not spare his life in battles or his property at weddings"; or "If everybody likes their own nation, then the nations will like each other". There is also a long section about the importance of smiling, and an attribution of a "symbolic animal" to every arbitrary epoch of Turkmen history. Criticism of the book could lead to a jail sentence; few smiles there. "I am the Turkmen spirit, reborn to bring you a Golden Age!" one of his poems began, before adding that this promise applied only to those who "are still faithful to me". He is clearly a lot like Father Christmas: "If you are honest in your deeds, I see this/If you commit wrongdoing, I see this too." Even foreign businessmen had to behave. Deals were dependent on funding the translation of Niyazov's words into as many tongues as possible, even Zulu. As Turkmenbashi morphed into Oguz Khan, TV began broadcasting strange photographic evidence that he was magically growing younger, his hair becoming blacker by the day... but then, in 2006, Niyazov died of sudden heart-failure and the *Ruhnama* dropped right off the best-seller list.

Berdymukhamedov has since removed the *Ruhnama* from shelves and curricula, in favour of his own literary efforts, notably a ten-volume guide to *The Medicinal Plants of Turkmenistan*. Besides medicinal plants and Akhal-Teke horses, Arkadag also writes books on two other key topics: tea and carpets. In 2016, his *Tea: Medicine and Inspiration* was launched, teaching how drinking cups of tea forged an "unbreakable bond [between] eras and generations" as shown by MPs kissing



ABOVE: President Berdimuhamedov poses with an ancient Akhal-Teke breed studhorse, Begkhan, that won an 'International Annual Horse Beauty Contest' in Ashgabat in 2016.

its cover in admiration. Carpets also weave new bonds between the Turkmen people, Arkadag wrote in *Heavenly Beauty*, published to a “high printing standard” on the national ‘Day of Celebration of the Turkmen Carpet’, and featuring chapters like ‘Song of Nature’ and ‘Carpet – Congeniality’, with a blurb promising to take readers on a “virtual voyage on a magic carpet throughout time and space”. Apparently, “to weave a carpet is a dream for any Turkmen woman”, as when looking at one, “one feels the tenderness of the carpet-maker’s soul”, thus leading to a happy home and hearth. Having nice carpets is the main “criterion of welfare” for the Turkmen people, due to the “miracle-working power of the carpet” to ensure domestic bliss. Based on “interesting information” he had found, Arkadag told a legend about a beautiful woman who wove the first carpet from seven colours, before flying up to heaven on it – this meant that the seven-coloured rainbow itself was an inherently carpet-related phenomenon! The “magic number seven” was also seen in the seven musical notes, the Seven Wonders of the World and the seven days of the week, all of which are derived from occult knowledge of regional carpets. As was explained, *Heavenly Beauty* was no mere sample catalogue, but an “original encyclopædia of carpet philosophy”. New Presidential poems are also now printed on newspaper front pages. 2015’s *Go, Go! Only Forward, Motherland – Turkmenistan!* is especially poignant, although sadly has nothing to do with carpets.⁵

TURKMENATOR 2: JUDGEMENT DAY

In 2019, unthinkable rumours spread that the Turkmen Tolstoy had died of kidney failure. With Arkadag unaccountably not being seen on TV for several consecutive minutes, had his ‘Era of Might and Happiness’ reached a premature end? No. It was announced that the President was just away on holiday – an all-action one. To show he was still alive, State TV broadcast a 30-minute compilation of the vacationing hero hitting the gym, riding a horse and a bicycle, shooting guns, watching his own music videos, playing a synthesiser and writing another book. Then, to prove he really would be back soon, The Turkmenator jumped into a nearby rally-car and sped off to the Karakum Desert at dawn, pulling skids around the edge of a giant fiery gas-crater known as the ‘Gates of Hell’. He didn’t fall in, but the experience must have caused distress, as the 62-year-old leader’s previously remarkably jet-black hair has now turned grey. To imitate him, males had previously been encouraged to dye their own locks black too, but this edict has been reversed and hairdressers told only to give customers grey tints, as from now on “mostly [only] grey-haired people will be allowed to meet him”. There may be plenty of those soon.

Collapsing energy revenues and the cessation of purchases by the Russian



ABOVE: Last year saw the appearance in Ashgabat of a huge statue of the President’s favourite breed of dog.

petro-giant GazProm in 2016 are causing hyper-inflation, mass unemployment, poverty and food-riots. Even Turkmenbashi’s great gift of free condiments has now been withdrawn by the salt-snatching Arkadag, a decision rapturously applauded by his MPs when announced. “The gratitude of our people towards you [for taking away their salt] is endless,” one said, during a parliamentary session devoted to passing major new austerity measures. “Glory to the Great Protector! Glory to the Hero!” chanted hundreds of like-minded salt-haters. According to Arkadag’s totalitarian spin, State spending is being slashed because there is now no need for such largesse, as everyone is growing richer anyway, even those who would appear to untutored eyes to be starving like dogs; the bones they chew in the street are probably just more dental aids. So endless is the national mood of thankfulness that the hit new *samizdat* film is Netflix’s latest action-movie *6 Underground*, directed by Michael Bay and set in the ‘fictional’ country of Turgistan, whose insane despotic ruler, named after Arkadag’s favourite non-throwing horse Rovach, is himself overthrown by a team of US-backed mercenaries. Plain-clothes agents now haunt DVD-rental stores, asking for illicit copies of the swiftly banned film to sniff out dangerous dissidents and impose fines of as much as £43 upon them.⁶

If Turkmenistan has now become the gigantic stage set for an all-action hero like Berdymukhamedov, then one big question arises: if, like Niyazov before him, he should die before the final credits on his Era of Might and Happiness have fully rolled, then which lucky replacement Cabinet Minister will be asked to become Turkmenator 2?

NOTES

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6 *Times*, 3 Nov 2018, 23 July, 6 Aug 2019, 10 Jan, 7 Feb 2020; www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-49319380; www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-49085767. Much of the action footage broadcast to ‘prove’ Berdymukhamedov was still alive may have been old. Rumour has it he was actually in Germany, visiting his sick mother.

For a Fortean Traveller trip to Turkmenistan in 2005 see **FT195:74-77**.

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Gloria's stall helps her pay for her children's education



■ Raised: £265.00
■ Needed: £622.10

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■ Raised: £640.00
■ Needed: £572.48

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George Clarke and the Grenfell baby

RYAN SHIRLOW looks at a case that shows how celebrities, like the rest of us, can suffer from extremely faulty recall...

Contrary to popular wisdom, eyewitness testimony is fragile, malleable and fundamentally unreliable. Every month *Fortean Times* catalogues the reports from ordinary people who have been deeply affected by an experience they cannot explain. Our supposedly shared reality spawns alternate personal histories, from the 9/11 attacks, to the death of Elvis Presley, to the hyphenation of Kit-Kat (see **FT394:32-38** for a recent round-up of cases of the so-called 'Mandela Effect').

Of course, our celebrities are not entirely immune, not even the amiable Georgie host of Channel 4's light entertainment DIY show *George Clarke's Amazing Spaces*. Architect and TV presenter Clarke was woken around 1am on the morning of 14 June 2017 by the commotion caused by a serious fire in a nearby tower block. The flames spread rapidly, and the disaster eventually claimed the lives of 72 of the residents of Grenfell Tower, in North Kensington, London.

Speaking the following day to BBC *Newsnight*'s David Grossman, a "clearly very tired" and emotional Clarke described what had happened:

Clarke: "One guy caught a kid... the kid was thrown out of a window from about the eighth floor, and the guy just caught him... it's amazing"

Grossman: "Really?"

Clarke: "Yeah, yeah"

Grossman: "You... you saw that?"

Clarke: "Yeah, yeah... yeah... it's just unbelievable, you know."

A subsequent investigation by the BBC revealed that another



ABOVE: Many witnesses saw Grenfell Tower burn, including George Clarke (right) and Samira Lamrani (below).

member of the public, Samira Lamrani, had given a live interview earlier that morning largely corroborating Clarke's version of events. Reports went on to feature in multiple UK media outlets, and were then picked up internationally.

Two days later a story in the British *Sun* newspaper misidentified Oluwaseun Talabi as 'Pat', the man who had allegedly caught the child. The accompanying photo in fact showed Oluwaseun holding his own daughter, with whom he had escaped in a more traditional fashion down the stairs.

The BBC contacted the police and ambulance services and could find no other primary witnesses or confirmation of the heroic deed. Grossman's analysis highlighted the improbability of effectively catching a 7kg (15lb) bowling ball falling at a speed in excess of 60km/h (37mph).

Lamrani claimed her memory of the event was fading, and Clarke issued the following statement: "I don't want to make any comment on it. Nothing whatsoever, because it's such a contentious issue and I think it's so hurtful to so many people."

The BBC suggested that what

Clarke might have seen was something reported by another eyewitness, Jody Martin: a child hanging out of a lower window, possibly on the third or fourth floor, in order to avoid the billowing smoke. This toddler was neither dramatically thrown nor caught, and a qualified architect might have been expected to gauge the height of the window accurately.

Responding later to criticism of the tone and timing of their investigation, *Newsnight* editor Ian Katz tweeted that the mystery of the Grenfell baby was "a powerful case study in how false narratives become accepted as truth even when lots of people [are] acting in good faith."

Clarke's story is instructive: as a celebrity, he cannot be easily dismissed as attention-seeking. This is a charge often levelled against other 'experiencers', but Clarke was already the host of his own successful television series. Indeed, Clarke's later statement is at pains to avoid giving offence to the victims from any further negative publicity.

So what is happening here? And does Clarke's television background perhaps give us a clue? With the cameras rolling, did an exhausted Clarke fall into a familiar subcon-

sious rhythm of ad-libbing for the audience, following a slightly leading series of questions from the interviewer?

Improvising in such a fashion necessarily bypasses our full conscious control – just try talking, or even *walking*, normally in front of a TV crew when you become overly aware of their baleful lens.

Already tired and struggling to process the human tragedy he had just witnessed, did Clarke slip into auto-pilot, internalising and visualising Lamrani's statement, or the scene Martin described?

We are unlikely to find out, but Clarke's experience at least reminds us that qualified, even celebrity testimony, is as human and as fallible as that of anyone else.

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Adventures in Randonauting

BRIAN J ROBB explores the lockdown app craze that led bored teenagers to encounter the strange, the weird and the dead.

It became the unexpected socially-distant app craze of last year's summer lockdown, but so-called 'Randonauting' soon revealed a dark side. There's nothing new in mobile gadget fads, from the mid-1990s when Tamagochis were all the rage to the recent Pokemon Go craze, which saw people flocking to random locations using Augmented Reality (AR) to track down sought-after 'pocket monsters'. The latest app to capture the attention of younger users is Randonautica, with those pursuing the 'hobby' described as 'Randonauts'.

Randonauting is based on the use of a mobile phone app which directs users to visit randomly generated co-ordinates near them. If you're looking to shake up your walking routine, this is an ideal way of exploring areas you'd normally go nowhere near. The free Randonautica app works by allowing the user to define the radius within which they're willing to explore; then, drawing upon a 'quantum random number generator', the app highlights location co-ordinates within this set radius.

The app is the creation of 29-year-old former circus performer Joshua Lengfelder. In January 2019 in a fringe science group on Telegram he came across the 'Fatum Project'. This was an attempt to explore ignored spaces beyond those normally encountered, or in one description, "to research unknown spaces outside predetermined probability-tunnels of the holistic world... a fully functional reality-tunnel creating machine that



digs rabbit holes to Wonderland". Lengfelder latched on to the concept of random exploration, where people could be diverted from their "predetermined realities" into taking a fresh look at the world around them. "People were trapped in their houses and it gave them a way to break out of their normal routine. It's one of the few activities you can do while social distancing but still stay safe," he told *The Atlantic*.

It's true that for most people day-to-day reality is an accepted routine. Most people use the same route to travel to and from work each day, which results in them becoming accustomed to their surroundings, and so ignoring them. Even those who walk for pleasure tend to stick to known routes or prescribed paths. "Stepping out of your comfort zone activates a different kind of attention," claimed psychologist Roderick Main, talking to *Vice*. "These types of practices encourage us to break from our rigid cause and effect way of thinking, and open us up to seeing other types of connections." Lengfelder was open to disrupting such boring routines, forcing an exploration of places people might not normally visit, including so-called 'blind-spots', areas not normally seen as they fall outside regular conscious awareness.

There is more to Randonauting than simply finding a walk off the beaten track. There were greater depths to the Fatum Project that

Lengfelder also drew upon. The research looked at how thoughts or interests might affect the 'random' generation of co-ordinates. Could human consciousness itself affect the outcome? Consciousness is a huge grey area for science: it has never been properly explained or understood, leaving the field open to all sorts of explorations, from the mental to the chemical. Some researchers have called upon the equally little understood field of quantum physics to explain consciousness, as if one mystery could provide the answer to another.

For Lengfelder, the idea that users of an app could influence the random generation of co-ordinates with their minds was intriguing. Once users of Randonautica have set their radius, the next task is to indicate whether they'd be happy to visit oddly named spaces such as 'attractors', 'voids', or 'anomalies'. The app explains attractors as "highly concentrated quantum points" (meaning areas highly populated with 'random' co-ordinates), voids are the opposite, "sparse quantum points", while anomalies are defined as "reported patterns of areas influenced by thought". The app requests that users 'focus' their 'intent' while using it, so that their thoughts and interests might affect the process, in so-called Mind-Matter Interactions (MMI). While the main aim of the app might be to break people's routines, there is a more sinister

undercurrent to some of these suggestions.

By the summer of 2020, the Randonautica app had been downloaded over 10 million times, its exponential growth propelled by TikTok videos. The hashtag #randonautica gathered over 180 million views by July. While most users found themselves in such mundane places as car parks, fields and ponds, some have been led further afield.

An Australian user, thinking of 'London', was led to a map of the London Underground. Others were brought to the seldom visited graves of relatives (obviously a message 'from beyond'), while thoughts of 'treasure' led Randonauts to a rare Luna moth, 'alien' to an 'Alien X-ing' sign, and 'weird but not scary' to a door painted with the words 'not scary' (there are photos). While searching for 'guidance' another Randonaut was led to a reflecting mirror emblazoned with the words "It's Your Time!" Could there be some form of 'quantum entanglement' between the users and their eventual destination? The public relations value of a 'haunted' app meant Randonautica was built to become a media sensation.

There have been reports of Randonautica users being led to spooky or supernatural places where they have met with the unknown or experienced oddly synchronistic adventures that seem to confirm the influence of their thoughts on the app (some of these videos have undoubtedly been faked or hyped up for effect, and are usually scored with horror film music). For some, the 'adventure' has been much more serious, such as the documented case of a group of teenagers who were led to discover a suitcase stuffed with dismembered body parts.

In Seattle, teens following their Randonautica co-ordinates were led to a local beach where they found an old black suitcase washed up on the rocks. Hoping



it contained money, they began to open it. Only then did they notice the stench from the plastic-wrapped items inside. Concerned they'd stumbled across a dead body, they called the police. The event is documented with a Seattle police press release covering the discovery headlined: "Detectives Investigating After Human Remains Found in West Seattle". The release recounts how "plastic bags containing human remains" had been "located near the water" after the police had "received a call of a suspicious bag on the beach". They confirmed the discovery of the remains of two dead bodies, one male and one female, aged 27 and 36, at Duwamish Head, Puget Sound, Seattle. Speaking of the incident, Lengfelder said: "When you're sending millions of people to random locations and searching the hidden corners of reality, you're bound to find some pretty shocking stuff sometimes. It's not the best press, but I'm not really that upset about it, because it's kind of cool. I kind of wish it was me who found it."

FT readers might recall Puget Sound as the location of the 'Maury Island incident' in 1947, in which the notorious Fred Crisman (see FT355:32-39) and Harold Dahl reportedly sighted a fleet of six flying saucers, were showered with falling debris, and were later harassed by mysterious 'men in black'. An FBI investigation concluded the entire incident was a hoax, but that didn't stop pulp publisher Raymond A Palmer making a meal of it in *Fate* magazine in 1948 with a debut issue cover story written by Kenneth Arnold, coiner of the term 'flying saucer' (see FT355:40-45, 46-49). Puget Sound, the Pacific north-west, and Mount Rainier are all areas of high strangeness, so it is almost predictable that the most newsworthy event from the Randonauting summer of 2020 should have taken place there.

The connection between the app and a true-life crime scene brought added attention to the hobby. A slew of similar reports soon hit the Internet, including one user who claimed thoughts of 'death' had brought her to the location of a man dying from a



"You're bound to find some pretty shocking stuff sometimes"

gunshot wound. Such videos have scored millions of views. The temptation to fabricate something outrageous for the online kudos seems overwhelming among the demographic attracted to such apps. It encourages teenagers, perhaps under the influence of consciousness-altering substances, to venture into areas they don't know well and video themselves while doing so. It was inevitable something newsworthy was going to happen despite the warnings not to go at night, not to trespass and not to break the law.

There are stories of users swearing off the app after weird experiences. Wandering through unfamiliar environments in the dead of night offers teens a thrill, but some have found the after-effects disturbing. Encounters with the bogeyman might mean running into strangers in

isolated spots at night, and the app generates more than its fair share of weird stories – but those are the ones that get self-reported rather than the many boring jaunts that led nowhere. Returning home in the belief that their unconscious thoughts have affected their experiences, some app users have been overcome with unease or disquiet, enough to start offering warnings, often under the headline "Don't Go Randonauting!" Which, of course, makes young people want to go Randonauting.

Synchronicities, when noticed, can be deeply and personally significant – that's why they're noticed. Finding significant objects versus random items, crossed with confirmation bias, means Randonauts often find what they are looking for, because looking makes people more present and observant.

For their part, the creators of the app claim that it grew far beyond their intentions, but through their use of buzzy concepts like attractors, voids, anomalies, and thought-directed random numbers, they were inviting trouble. "Basically, if you are looking for any kind

LEFT: Randonauting scare videos, and warnings not to use the app, have proliferated on social media.

of peer-reviewed scientific consensus, that does not exist yet," admitted Lengfelder in a video last summer. To defend his work, he latched onto the field of parapsychology, specifically the work of Dean Radin and the Princeton Engineering Anomalies Research (PEAR) programme. An experiment carried out by PEAR in 1998 suggested that humans could, through 'micro-psychokinesis', influence a random number generator simply through their thoughts. Published in the *Journal of Scientific Exploration* – focused on the paranormal and supernatural – the study revealed what more mainstream scientists identified as a weak and non-repeatable correlation; correlation not equalling causation and repeatability are, of course, central to the scientific method. Coincidence and confirmation bias have a lot to answer for – most coincidences are so trivial and unremarkable they are barely noticed. However, if an app has snared their attention by requiring 'focus', a user will notice that which normally passes them by. There's more than a hint of Tarot readings, séances, and astrology in Randonauting, with the bonus of added exercise. It's like a creepy, real-life Choose Your Own Adventure app.

Talking to the *New York Times*, physicist Daniel J Rogers – who has worked extensively with random number generators – demolished Randonautica's claims of 'spooky effects' as "completely absurd. There is no quantum physics here. This is just people using big science words to sound magical. There is no actual science here."

With all that being said, perhaps anything that makes people more aware of the world around them should be welcomed...

◆ **BRIAN J ROBB** is the author of an award-winning guide to Tolkien's Middle-earth. He is a Founding Editor of the *Sci-Fi Bulletin* website and a regular contributor to FT.

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Optimism for *Homo sapiens*

Ross MacFarlane discovers just what it means to be human (or not) in this rich, engrossing, thought-provoking and brilliantly written study

Human

Amanda Rees & Charlotte Sleigh

Reaktion Books 2020

Pb, 216pp, £12.95, ISBN 9781789142143

Fingers on buzzers: which species was described in 2008 by the International Council for the Conservation of Nature as “very widely distributed, adaptable, currently increasing” and facing “no major threats resulting in an overall population decline”? As Amanda Rees and Charlotte Sleigh answer at the start of their innovative and thought-provoking book, it’s us – *Homo sapiens*.

Published as part of Reaktion Books’ excellent Animal series, *Human* follows a different path from its sister titles. Whereas those books – from Albatross to Zebra – have sought to show how animals have been culturally defined, *Human* tries a different method – trying not to define human-ness immediately but examining first what it has meant not to be human.

Rees and Sleigh do this through discussing six concepts – Beast, Hominin, Machine, She, God, Alien – from a dizzying array of perspectives. Their writing is grounded in their academic backgrounds in history and philosophy of science and builds upon the recent growth of studies – across a range of disciplines – of human and animal relations.

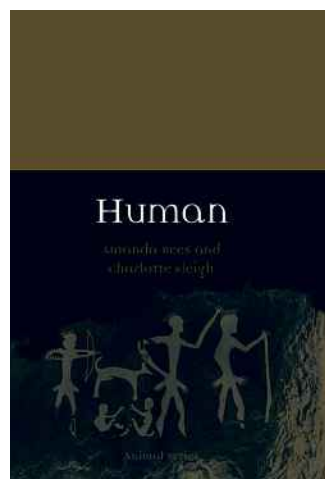
Their own research makes them ideal for the task in hand, having researched such topics as the history of field science, the contribution of science fiction to the development of science and studies of HG Wells and Charles Fort.

While you can sense the foundations of academic theory underpinning the book (the feminist science theorist Donna

Haraway never feels too far away), this never outweighs the approachability of the authors’ prose: this is a book brimming with a questioning intelligence yet written in a brilliantly nimble and engaging style.

Each chapter challenges accepted truths, examining how human and animal relations are contingent upon time and place. “Beast” begins with Aristotle’s non-hierarchical view of the animal world – that each animal should be looked upon as an exemplar of its own kind, as opposed to an inferior form of another – which the authors use to begin a critique of anthropocentrism that pervades the rest of the book.

Some chapters are shaped more around potted histories of their themes: “Hominin” traces the history of the understandings



of human antiquity; “She” the history of sex difference (and the primacy of the male within that). Race is a constant thread through all six chapters: for example, in “Hominin”, the authors show the interplay between ideas underpinning colonial thought and the human archaeological

Human-ness is to be found in recognising humanity in others and in granting it to other beings

finds of the 19th century (leading the “primitive” Neanderthal to exist in popular culture long after archaeological evidence proved this not to be the case)

“Machine” and “God” are slightly more philosophical in tone. The former takes us from 5th century BC China to the present day, but by way of Enlightenment automatons and the development of economic models. The latter draws from across the world’s religions but ends with a critique of contemporary notions of transhumanism, which the authors see as moving away from notions of a shared humanity.

“Alien” looks at the notions of the “Other” that underpin SF, and how tropes of invasion (whether at a global scale or at an individual level of violation when it comes to alien abduction narratives) can be traced back to violent colonial encounters in the 18th and 19th centuries.

For their conclusion, the authors bring the preceding chapters together not to suggest what makes a human being, but to suggest a definition of humanity. Drawing upon theological notions of immanence, they propose the term “imhumanism” – suggesting that human-ness is to be found in the act of recognising humanity in others and in granting it to other beings. Not, then, as an individual characteristic – such as, say, “intelligence” – that could be used as a marker

to exclude.

An enormous amount of ground is covered in the 200 pages of the book, so unsupported arguments do creep in (did the Tarzan books, as the authors claim, really have “abiding popularity” among “urban middle-managers and assembly-line workers” during the 20th century?). Similarly, with such a capacious topic there are going to be absences in the choice of sources, but it is surprising that *Gulliver’s Travels* isn’t drawn from (particularly Gulliver’s encounter with the Houyhnhnms, a race of talking horses) nor *Quatermass and the Pit* (given that Nigel Kneale’s plot hinges on Martian influence on human pre-history and was inspired by race riots in the 1950s).

But these are minor concerns: this is a rich, engrossing read that draws as comfortably from religious studies as it does from popular culture. The book is also a paragon of picture research – its carefully chosen images supporting and adding value to the text. A compact volume, yet brimming with ideas, *Human* brilliantly communicates leading-edge academic research in an approachable and engaging style.

In a much-quoted phrase, the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss claimed that “animals are good to think with”. Rees and Sleigh’s book shows that the human species is not just “good to think with”, it can be an intellectually enriching experience to read about as well.

Its hopeful conclusion suggests that even after the damaging effects of 2020, the International Council for the Conservation of Nature may still view the future of *Homo sapiens* with a degree of optimism.

★★★★★

The lure of merfolk

Our mythological cousins in the sea have a long and fascinating history

Merpeople

A Human History

Vaughn Scribner

Reaktion Books 2020

Hb, 320pp, £20, ISBN 9781789143140

Lusty, dangerous, pious, monstrous, thought provoking, ancient, modern. These are only a few of the ways in which merpeople can be described in Vaughn Scribner's impressive *Merpeople: A Human History*. It is a noteworthy book not just for its literary content but for its beautiful plates.

Merpeople have long endured in art, culture, film, religion, philosophy, photography and politics. The book covers a wide range of perceptions – from Western to global.

Their sightings are well documented throughout the ages. They can be beautiful – sirens with flowing locks, manatees or dugongs or the less visually appealing chimeras. They can be clever, religious or non-religious. They can be compared to humans of the time – an example being Mary Queen of Scots and Elizabeth I – with the latter receiving a more flattering comparison.

The work starts in mediæval times and mermen (or tritons) are discussed with relevance, among other things, to the mediæval Christian Church – mermen appeared in church carvings but often in combination with mermaids, as mermen were considerably more limited. In mediæval times they served to reinforce patriarchal notions of the Church.

By the Renaissance merpeople had been fully integrated into aspects of life. As travel became more accessible so too did these mysterious creatures;

Christopher Columbus reportedly spotted three mermaids as soon as he had arrived in the West Indies. Cartographers further helped to reinforce this notion with mermaids and tritons appearing on maps, and Sebastian Munster took this further with his giant mermaid off the eastern coast of India in his *Cosmographia universalis*.

Merpeople were also used by philosophers in debates to discuss the origins of humankind and their link to our understanding of our own humanity. They can be a metaphor for most aspects of life and their humanity is important because they

are half human. Scientific discovery and experimentation were also becoming more important in this Enlightenment period – old claims of sightings were not enough.

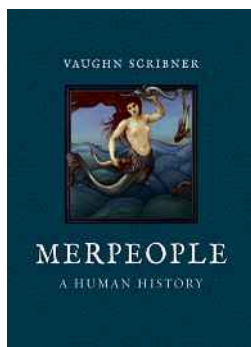
This book moves on to the 19th century, focusing on PT Barnum and the amount of publicity he created in trying to convince the public of the validity of merpeople. His much-hyped Feejee mermaid was in fact more like a chimera, as she had been fashioned from a monkey and a fish.

Western mermaids carried on in popularity and are brought up to the modern day with representations in films such as the 1980s comedy *Splash* and contemporary cosplayers and professional mermaids.

This is a thoroughly enjoyable and scholarly read drawing on a wide variety of sources. Vaughn Scribner succeeds in giving these fascinating folk the recognition they deserve.

Elizabeth James

★★★★★



Grave Disturbances

The Archaeology of Post-Depositional Interactions with the Dead

Edeltraud Aspöck, Alison Klevnäs & Nils Müller-Scheeßel

Oxbow Books 2020

Hb, 244pp, £55, ISBN 9781789254426

Historically, archaeologists have found grave-robbing frustrating rather than fascinating. Disturbed graves were widely believed to have been looted of their valuables, depriving archaeologists of the chance to study these objects. However, more recent archaeological studies have focused more on burials themselves, rather than merely their contents. With this change has come an increasing realisation that much of what is commonly called grave-robbing is not truly “robbing” at all, but represents a wide range of different practices.

In *Grave Disturbances*, the editors collect 12 papers dealing with the opening, disturbance or re-use of graves. The studies cover post-burial interactions in graves from mediæval Sweden, early mediæval Poland, the Lower Volga in the early middle ages, early mediæval Gaul, Viking Age Norway, Iron Age Austria, Iron Age Macedonia, Early Bronze Age Slovakia and New Kingdom Egypt, as well as the whole sweep of Maya history.

Rather than simply seeing grave disturbance as motivated by treasure-seeking, these papers present a wide range of different interpretations of post-burial interaction with the dead by the living. There is some genuine grave-robbing, sometimes carried out by organised gangs operating with official quasi-approval, but other types of disturbance are equally if not more common. These include opening graves to add new bodies, remove parts of bodies, perhaps as relics, mutilate bodies to prevent them from rising again, and more.

Although each study is different, the volume as a whole demonstrates the limits of interpreting any disturbed grave as having been robbed. Instead, these papers encourage us to view burial not as the end of the

funerary rite, but simply as one stage in an ongoing interaction between the living and the dead. While clearly intended for an academic audience, *Grave Disturbances* is still worth reading for anyone interested in the history of death and burial, although the wide range of topics may limit its value for anyone interested in just one of the periods or regions it covers.

James Holloway

★★★★★

The Holy Shroud

A Brilliant Hoax in the Time of the Black Death

Gary Vikan

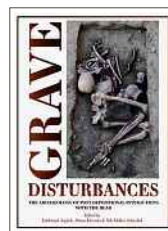
Pegasus Books 2020

Hb, 304pp, £22, ISBN 9781643134321

Few material mysteries have been solved as often as the Shroud of Turin. Here is Byzantine scholar Gary Vikan's report on the relic. The author's resumé as former director of the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore, Maryland, combined with renown for detecting fakes and forgeries, is top notch. Shroud authenticators, or sindonologists as I learned they're called, will want to take note. On Vikan's playing field the Shroud is serious business. The purported burial cloth of Christ inspires obsession and controversy, dividing researchers into incompatible camps. And this has been going on for centuries. To debunk or to believe?

Vikan's obsession began one morning in 1981 when he found an ad for a replica Shroud half-buried in a snowbank. The scrap of newsprint set in motion a lifelong quest to understand the Shroud. Vikan, though an atheist, casts the moment as an encounter with destiny. It's a wonderfully personal episode, and one of the book's most moving passages; the writing reveals as much about Vikan as it does the Shroud.

As Vikan and the Shroud entwine, the book takes on a “highlight reel” quality. The museum director's triumphs and missteps are relayed, advanced by the lure of the linen. Aside from that wonderful snapshot from snowy 1981, the autobiographical moments don't necessarily endear Vikan to us; there are too many swipes at opposing specialists, replays of old lectures and a slow drip of subtle boasts and brags. The pop-culture connections –





the secular saintliness of Elvis Presley; parallels between the mortified flesh of the Man of the Shroud; and special effects from *The Passion of the Christ* – are interesting enough ideas framed as eureka moments.

After collaborating with chemists from Oklahoma, Vikan determines the Shroud was a body print made with iron gall ink, originating from around 1350. This cloth was displayed in a French church for an all-too-worldly purpose. It was a moneymaker, a hoax, complete with bogus miracles to stoke excitement. This reasoning makes sense in terms of motive and method. Vikan's knowledge and achievements are formidable. His atheism suggests a pursuit of the item's objective truth within the historical record. He is probably right.

Yet the career milestones and lofty tone lost me somewhere along the way to Turin. Vikan's explanation of the iron gall printing process seemed too vague, and the scientific addendum written by the collaborating chemists wasn't much help. Vikan's final determination that the Shroud be removed from Turin and stashed away forever in a Vatican basement is jarring after earlier attempts to be light-hearted. Then there is the book's bizarre conclusion where Vikan shares a fantasy of meeting Pope Francis. The pontiff asks for advice on the Church's position on the Shroud, and Vikan, ever-humble, imagines giving the Pope a copy of his book with the confident promise that it has the answers that are needed.

Mike Pursley

★★

The Return of Holy Russia

Apocalyptic History, Mystical Awakening and the Struggle for the Soul of the World

Gary Lachman

Inner Traditions 2020

Hb, 438pp, £25, ISBN 9781620558102

Gary Lachman has produced previous explorations of the esoteric dimensions of politics,

most recently *Dark Star Rising: Magick and Power in the Age of Trump*, published in 2018. That study provided insights not only into the influence of occult thinking on the US "alternative right", but also recent Russian traditionalist thinkers such as Lev Gumilev and Alexander Dugin. *The Return of Holy Russia* is clearly intended to be its "sequel", but although the title suggests a study of recent developments, it is considerably more ambitious than that: nothing less, in fact, than a spiritual and esoteric history of Russia.

By way of overture, the author takes us to "The Silver Age" of Russia, a period of literary and esoteric flowering from 1890 to 1920, which produced not only renowned poets such as Alexander Blok, but a host of colourful gurus – Helena Blavatsky, George Gurdjieff (actually a Greek-Armenian) and, of course, Grigori Rasputin.

From this starting point, the author then takes the reader back through a chronological survey of Russian history from the arrival of the Slavs in the 5th and 6th centuries AD to the current Russian Republic under Vladimir Putin.

Using political history as a narrative framework, Lachman weaves in numerous strands of esoteric thinking and practice that have played roles in Russian culture, from shamanism, paganism and herbalism, through to the secret societies of the Enlightenment such as Freemasonry and Martinism.

At the heart of this story, though, is the distinctively mystical sensibility of Russian Orthodox Christianity, where practices such as the veneration of icons and the contemplative prayer of hesychasm point the believer towards "theosis", the divinisation of humanity. Lachman explores how this perspective, allied to the power of the state, has led to a sense of Russian spiritual exceptionalism, with the country perceiving itself as a unique repository of Christian values – the "Third Rome" – after the fall of Constantinople in 1453.

Russia as the last, great Christian civilisation – an idea freighted with apocalyptic

expectations – is presented as a recurrent theme in Russian intellectual history, and one revived in recent years with Putin's championing of Silver Age writers such as Nikolai Berdyaev and Vladimir Solovyov, who believed that, in Solovyov's words, the Russian people have a special destiny in "gathering the Universe together".

There is much to engage in this book, and as is obvious, it covers a huge range of history and ideas. But its chronological structure can obscure key themes, and the author's enthusiasm for his subject can occasionally lure him away from his usually shrewd critical sense towards mild devotion. As a consequence, his underlying claims for the value of the Russian thinkers are more often stated than demonstrated, and the reader comes away with the sense that his goal might have been more easily achieved in a shorter and more focused book.

Matthew Redhead

★★★

Wormwood Star

The Magickal Life of Marjorie Cameron

Spencer Kansa

Mandrake of Oxford 2020

Pb, 331pp, £13.99, ISBN 9781906958602

Wormwood Star is the biography of an occult artist and occasional actress who is too often eclipsed by the man she was briefly married to, the brilliant, maverick, early rocket engineer and Thelemic occultist Jack Parsons.

When the red-head Cameron turned up at Parsons' Pasadena home in 1946 she was supposedly the result of sex-magick rituals Parsons had performed with a pre-Scientology L Ron Hubbard to summon a Scarlet Woman. Over the next five years or so she and Parsons had a torrid and often tempestuous open marriage.

Always a wild child, after Parsons' death in a chemical explosion in 1952 Cameron hung out with jazz musicians, artists, actors and writers, corresponded with mythologist Joseph Campbell, practised magick, took a lot

of drugs, enjoyed a variety of sexual relationships and had a daughter, Crystal, who bitterly resented Cameron's careless parenting – all detailed in this caring but warts-and-all biography.

In 1954 she starred as the Scarlet Woman in Kenneth Anger's short film *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome*, which reflected his interest in Thelema. The title of this book comes from another short film, *The Wormwood Star* (1955), which featured her paintings and poetry; it's the only record of much of her art because she destroyed many of her paintings in a ritual act of suicide. An exhibition of her work in 1957 was closed immediately for being pornographic. (Her highly erotic esoteric art is available in two beautiful but very pricey large-format books both entitled *Songs for the Witch Woman*: one a reproduction of a notebook of Jack Parsons' poems with Cameron's illustrations, the other the catalogue of a 2014 exhibition in Los Angeles.)

Wormwood Star is essential and fascinating reading for anyone with an interest in Cameron's life and work, including her involvement with Parsons and Hubbard. But one wonders, as it makes clear that Cameron loathed her first name and never used it, why include it in the subtitle?

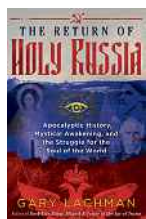
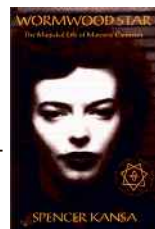
Thirty pages longer than the previous one, this new edition has an updated text, slightly improved layout and some new photographs, while others are larger and (to some extent) sharper than previously – though printing old and often blurry b&w photos on text pages is never a good idea. As the photos are scattered throughout the book, a contents list would have been useful.

And *caveat emptor*: the only sign on the front cover that this is the "2020 edition" rather than the 2014 "new edition" is tiny lettering on the roundel.

The author was refused permission to use any of Cameron's art or any of her own writings, including her magickal diaries, in this biography; he had to use old-fashioned legwork, tracking down and interviewing people who had known her. Many of them have since died; this book is invaluable in preserving their memories of a remarkable but often troubled woman.

David V Barrett

★★★★



A life of psi

Tom Ruffles finds that the rigorous approach of a collection of essays by a respected psychical researcher is a corrective to shallow thinking

Dangerous Pursuits

Mediumship, Mind and Music

Stephen E Braude

Anomalist Books 2020

Pb, 331pp, £14.50, ISBN 9781949501155

Stephen Braude, emeritus professor of philosophy at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, has had a distinguished career as a psychical researcher, but the path has not always been easy (though dangerous might be putting it too strongly). The title alludes to the professional complications he has experienced as a result, and he advises less senior academics with similar interests to be discreet, at least until they have achieved tenure.

Versions of these essays previously appeared in specialist publications over a 30-year period, but they have been revised to reinforce links between them and increase their accessibility to a general audience. However, the arguments can get technical in the more theoretical sections.

As the subtitle suggests, a major focus of the book is on mental and physical mediumship, and more broadly the problem of distinguishing between survival of bodily death and what he terms living-agent psi. He also explores the difficulties in determining the limits of psi (i.e. psychic abilities), and the boundaries between its various forms.

He begins by analysing the distaste for paranormal research expressed by critics who dismiss the subject with sloppy arguments without bothering to study it. He suspects the root lies in a fear of the implications of psi abilities in everyday life, when their extent and potential for harm are unknown (an inhibiting effect that he believes can extend to parapsychologists' own experiments).

The following two chapters describe Braude's involvement

with physical medium Kai Mügge's Felix Experimental Group in Germany between 2010 and 2015, demonstrating that Braude is not just an armchair pundit. Despite finding evidence of cheating, he concludes there were genuine phenomena. This is important documentation of the Felix Circle, whether or not one agrees with Braude's conclusion.

Shifting from recent investigations to historical research, Braude examines the career of Brazilian physical medium Carlos Mirabelli who, he contends, deserves to be better known. Mirabelli was another who clearly cheated at times but regularly produced astonishing phenomena under strictly controlled conditions.

Braude has championed DD Home as perhaps "the greatest physical medium of all time", someone who manifested a wide range of effects and was never

detected in fraud. He scrutinises Trevor Hall's shoddy 1984 book *The Enigma of Daniel Home*, a valuable service

as it is still cited despite its deficiencies.

Other chapters cover physical and mental mediumship and other aspects of psychic functioning, one theme being that the terminology used has often been underscrutinised. Braude dissects the notion of super psi – generally used to suggest psi among the living could be extensive enough to account for any evidence for post-mortem communication – and finds it wanting. The chapter on mental mediumship builds on this discussion, particularly the vexed issue of deciding between the survival and living-agent psi interpretations.

Braude next asks how the deceased, given their apparent ability to describe events in

the world via mediums, can have a perceptual point of view in the absence of a physical body. One solution would be clairvoyant awareness, but it would undermine the survivalist position by implying that living-agent psi could explain communications attributed to discarnate communicators.

A chapter on what Braude considers terminological blunders takes aim at colleagues who replace familiar terms like ESP with "anomalous cognition", and psychokinesis with "anomalous perturbation", arguing that while they attempt to make the subject respectable they are less precise than the existing vocabulary (and sceptics aren't fooled anyway).

Braude is clearly a fan of philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, a contemporary of William James, and he gathers together thoughts about psychical research sprinkled throughout his writings. But despite the characterisation of Peirce as a "genius", his contributions, while wide-ranging, are nowhere near as significant as James's, and even Braude concedes he was a "parapsychologist by default".

Dissociative identity disorder is broken down into its various forms, demonstrating it is faulty reasoning to posit the existence of pre-dissociative structures that facilitated the post-dissociative divisions. Concluding the volume, an essay on jazz improvisation feels out of place but shows that Braude's range is not confined to the psychical.

Dangerous Pursuits is not always an easy read but it repays careful study, and there are plentiful endnotes and references to follow up. Braude's rigorous approach is a corrective to shallow thinking in psychical research, and there is much of value here for anyone wishing to delve into the topics in more depth than is often the case in the literature.

★★★★★

Superstitions

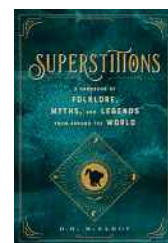
A Handbook of Folklore, Myths and Legends from Around the World

DR McElroy

Wellfleet Press 2020

Hb, 194pp, £11.99, ISBN 9781577151913

The subtitle for this book provides an accurate description of the contents, as the book isn't composed solely of superstitions. Instead, Conway takes us on a whistle-stop tour of world mythology. Each continent is introduced with a couple of pages on its history followed by a guide to its gods and goddesses, fantastical creatures and yes, superstitions and folk beliefs.



It's a short book and the individual entries are very brief. The Hindu sun god Surya merits just three lines, with 18 lines

generously allocated to Australian creation goddess Yhi. No belief, deity or creature gets much more than this.

The author assumes the reader to be most familiar with European folklore although the book appears to be written primarily for an American audience. There are points where I wish she had the space to expand the entries further and give the material a more serious treatment, such as in her discussion of European colonialism, of which she is rightly critical while recognising its role in the formation of syncretic religions such as voodoo. In other respects, though, Conway can be annoyingly twee. Is it just me who finds "pooping" and "the birds and the bees" irritating in a book written for adults?

The material is nicely presented on peach-coloured pages with small black and white line drawings throughout and a one-page colour plate at the start of each section. It's very much a gift book, strong on visuals but light in substance. It may serve as an introduction to world mythology for the beginner, so it is unfortunate that there is no bibliography to guide the curious to further reading. A fun read, but hardly essential.

Paula Dempsey

★★★



ALSO RECEIVED

WE LEAF THROUGH A SMALL SELECTION OF THE DOZENS OF BOOKS THAT HAVE ARRIVED AT FORTÉAN TOWERS ONLY TO GET LOST DOWN THE BACK OF BOB RICKARD'S SOFA...

Sublime Light on the Turin Shroud The true origin of a controversial medieval relic

Ludo Noens

Aspekt, 2019

PB, £16.95, 248pp, refs, index. ISBN 9789463385138

In April 1988, the Vatican allowed a small sample of the famous Shroud kept in Turin Cathedral to be cut and subjected to Carbon dating in three top European universities. The results came back six months later: the cloth was dated to between 1260 and 1390. Far from settling the matter, new disputes have raged. Some argue about the quality of the cut samples. Some say that the precise method of faking the negative-like image still cannot be resolved as it is not the result of burning or painting. Author Noens's hypothesis is that in the later Middle Ages, pious meditators managed to radiate some sort of mystical light that impressed the image. His documentation of each stage of this notion is quietly intriguing.

UFO Contacts in Italy, vols 1 & 2

Roberto Pinotti

Flying Disk Press, 2019

PB, £14 each, 269pp per volume.
ISBN 9798647115010 & 9781522064688

Flying Disk continues its valuable documentation of continental ufology with these large format imprints crammed with historic images of interest to historians and the specialist. Sad to say, the earnestness of the author is let down by Flying Disk's amateurish editing and presentation which makes life difficult for the reader.

Shine On The Remarkable Story of How I Fell Under a Speeding Train, Journeyed to the Afterlife, and the Astonishing Proof I Brought Back with Me

David Ditchfield and JS Jones

O-Books, 2020

PB, £12.00, 260pp. ISBN 9781789043655

In all the works on NDEs and OOBs, so-called 'crisis' exterrations are among the

most mysterious. Here is David Ditchfield's own story of "how I fell under a speeding train, journeyed to the Afterlife, and the astonishing proof I brought back with me." Despite its novelistic style, there is a lot of good and sensible data and discussion to back it up. A small appendix at the back holds the testimony of six people (including co-author Jones) who were with Ditchfield from his accident to his recovery, seeing how it changed him, and who vouch for his statements. A cracking read with an approving foreword by Dr Raymond Moody.

Sirius: The Star of Maltese Temples

Lenie Reedijk

Malet Books, 2018

PB, £20.99, 198pp. ISBN 9789490216047

This bold and provocative investigation of prehistoric Malta challenges the textbook consensus of how the archipelago's first settlers arrived around 5200 BC and that the first ritual sites began around a millennium later. Researched by a professional linguist who once lived on Malta, evidence hitherto swept under museum rugs and even deliberately destroyed (at the Hypogeum) is reassembled to strongly suggest that the island was inhabited by the Palaeolithic era, and that some of the "temples" are older than convention holds, possibly by up to several millennia. Temple axis and entrance alignments with the rising Sirius are key to this idea. Equally engaging is the history of the archaeologists who vied to control Malta's prehistory dating and frame it as an isolated culture.

Genius Weapons Artificial Intelligence, Autonomous Weaponry, and the Future of Warfare

Louis A Del Monte

Prometheus Books, 2018

PB, £11.99, 170pp. ISBN 9781633884526

Del Monte – a physicist, futurist and inventor – explores the bizarre fringes of micro-electronics, biochemistry and

Artificial Intelligence technology and what potential they would have in any future war. The prospect of military conflict by autonomous armies of biological or mechanical units controlled by onboard intelligent routines, he argues, is increasingly likely. In 2016, attendees to the World Economic Forum were asked if they would prefer a war settled by AI robots or by their sons and daughters; the majority went for AI. Cue the horrific prospects beloved of today's video war games as Skynet Day creeps nearer.

Gods and Robots Myths, Machines, and Ancient Dreams of Technology

Adrienne Mayor

Princeton University Press, 2020

PB, £11.99, 296pp. ISBN 9780691202266

In contrast to the above book, this is a completely different take on artificial life, being a survey of how the ancients imagined 'living' things made by man, not the gods. Mayor's examples are drawn from the oldest myths of the Greeks, Chinese, Indian, Roman and many other cultures. It is interesting to note how easily magic was put forward as the reason for or motivating power behind the moving statues, creatures and so on. Although mayor touches on the importance of the legendary first shaman-smiths to archaic societies, there could have been more discussion of the shaman-witch counterpart in the magical act of 'animation'. Mayor also shows how that the discussion (and dramatisation) of the ethical issues of creating artificial life are nothing new. Well-written and well-illustrated, here is a good example of accessible academic writing.

Legend Tripping A Contemporary Legend Casebook

Lynne McNeill and Elizabeth Tucker, eds

Utah State University Press, 2018

PB, £21, 275pp. ISBN 9781607328070

'Legend tripping' is – or was until the advent of COVID19 – an increasingly popular form of

focused tourism in which parties visit sites of notoriety, myth and legend, guided by authors or lecturers. In this first of a series, 10 experienced folklorists, historians and anthropologists discuss sites, legends and reactions. Our old friend Prof. Bill Ellis is among them.

Sacred Corridors Secrets Behind the Real Project Blue Book, Wright-Patterson AFB, Roswell, Battelle, Memory Metal, Dr J Allen Hynek & UFO Cover-Ups

Irena McCammon Scott

Flying Disk Press, 2018

PB, £14.00, 284pp. ISBN 9781791660680

Dr Scott – who worked for the US Defense Intelligence Agency and various aerospace institutions – recounts her years in the "sacred and hidden passageways where UFO studies took place", in particular Wright-Patterson AFB and the Blue Book archives. Being an 'insider' account, it is a tedious plod through thickets of names, places, incidents, records and disputes, and blizzards of unmemorable project acronyms, and so of value, probably, only to UFO historians. The pictorial documentation is more interesting, but mostly dull grey and out of focus. When, oh when, will Flying Disk get around to proper typesetting, navigable layouts and even an index? You know, things that might make a book more accessible to a wider readership.

The Sea of Consciousness George Adamski's lost debut, 'The Invisible Ocean'

Gerard Aartsen, George Adamski

BGA Publications, 2019

PB, £14.99, pp120. ISBN 9789090316956

A 'lost' essay by Adamski, one of the primary instigators of the contactee movement, inspired this small book. 'Invisible Ocean' was his first work, written in 1932, and shows his very early interest in Theosophical ideas of consciousness, and two later essays expand his ideas about how these relates to 'flying saucers' and their Earth-saving message. Scattered throughout are period photos and newspaper clippings that give this further historical value.

Out of the past

The latest low-budget sci-fi film from the unpredictable Benson and Moorhead duo offers a trippy take on time travel and an opportunity for Anthony Mackie to shine



Synchronic

Dirs Justin Benson and Aaron Moorhead, USA 2020
On demand from 29 January

Synchronic is a thoughtful and unsettling thriller with sci-fi elements from the directorial team who garnered attention with their two earlier films *Resolution* and, particularly, *The Endless*.

Two paramedics, Steve and Dennis (Anthony Mackie and Jamie Dornan) working in New Orleans, are called to a series of incidents in which the casualties bear unusual injuries and appear to be in some sort of drug-induced state of bewilderment. The police show no interest, but Steve's attention is piqued and he begins to investigate. Gradually he comes to understand that the incidents are all linked to a synthetic drug called *Synchronic* which, under the right conditions, can actually take the user back in time.

A juicy plot, then, but it's really only the topmost layer of what's going on in this fascinating film. It explores themes of loss, death, grief, and the spirit-crushing effect of living an empty life. That makes it sound downbeat – and it really is. This is a New Orleans you won't recognise from the brochures or, indeed, many other representations in cinema. Drug use is rife, the authorities either corrupt, uninterested, or absent, and personal relationships

The time-travel conceit is there to make a broader point about life

fleeting. The only happiness to be found is in stable partnerships, but these are hard to come by: Dennis's marriage is on the rocks and his friendship with Steve is pressurised by the personal disappointment they both feel.

However, without going into too much plot detail, just when life seems at its most pointless, Steve finds a reason to keep going and it infuses him with energy and purpose. It's here that the film – although still dark and violent – starts to become oddly uplifting. The things Steve witnesses on his quest are terrifying and wonderful and show the directors' imaginations in full flow. It's a magnificent spectacle.

The time-travelling conceit is there to make a broader point about life itself: that it has always been full of fear, prejudice and conflict, but the brief moments of wonder and human connection are what make it worth living, such as the beautiful scene where Steve tentatively and fleetingly bonds with a man from whom he is impossibly distanced in time.

Frustratingly, the concept

is better than the script, which strives to match the directors' ambition but often falls short of the profundity for which they are clearly aiming. The character of Dennis is under-drawn and ultimately functions more as a plot device than anything else. A good job then that Steve is front and centre for most of the film, and Anthony Mackie rises to the challenge superbly, as we see him go from portraying someone drifting through life to a man burning with curiosity and drive. It's a terrific performance.

Some might call the film pretentious, but ignore them; what it is is ambitious. Okay, it just falls short of some of its targets, but it offers things you'll struggle to find elsewhere and, unusually for a relatively mainstream film, is honest about the harsh realities of daily existence that have to be endured in order to experience the joy and wonder of life itself.

Daniel King



The Intergalactic Adventures of Max Cloud

Dir Martin Owen, UK 2020
101 Films, £15.99 Blu-ray, £13.99 DVD

This is an affectionate send-up of the kind of cheapo sci-fi flicks pushed out in the Eighties and Nineties, mashed up with *Last Starfighter*-style video game action. The titular hero is a Buzz Lightyear-ish, square-jawed lump of beefcake (played by British square-jawed lump of beefcake Scott Adkins) whose starship crashlands on the planet Heinous, a prison world ruled by chief baddie Revenger (John Hannah, light years from *Four Weddings and a Funeral*). Max tries to find a way to repair his vessel and get the hell off the planet, which is about to be scorched by the heat

of twin suns. Or something; you get the gist.

Only it turns out that *Max Cloud* is merely a video game and that spunky teenage gamer Sarah (Isabelle Allan) is controlling the characters. Somehow, she gets transported into the game, and her buddy Cowboy (Franz Drameh) has to control her to try to finish it and get her back home. So we're watching a 'film' within a game within a film, which is rather neat. What this allows director Martin Owen to do is not only fondly recall the late-Eighties but also the games of that era and the films from which they drew their inspiration (or vice versa). All of this relies on Owen getting the production design, art direction and set dressing spot-on – which, with the help of his crew, he does.

The films being aped are not *Star Wars* or even *Battlestar Galactica*, but the films they spawned and were still spawning 10 years later. Sometimes they were direct-to-video B pictures by Fred Olen Ray, such as the shonky but terrifically watchable *Prison Planet* or the cost-cutting *Deep Space*, which takes place almost entirely on Earth. Sometimes they were Italian rip-offs, like Antonio Margheriti's *Treasure Island in Outer Space*. Either way, they usually involved a square-jawed lump of beefcake, much running up and down corridors, kinky outfits and the odd rubbery monster. In a sense, then, Owen is spoofing films that were already semi-spoofs themselves; perhaps he sees it as homage, because he, like lots of genre fans, obviously loves this sort of material.

As a concept it's great, and as a film it delivers what you'd hope for from it. The acting is good – sometimes completely straight and at others, notably whenever John Hannah is on screen, so broad it almost bursts from the screen (in his defence, he is playing a gay Skeletor-type who watches aerobics videos to



calm his anxiety). To be honest, the joke wears a little thin towards the end, but ultimately this is amiable enough and made with sufficient skill to be worth a watch.

Daniel King



Short Sharp Shocks

Dir various, UK 1949-1980
BFI Flipside, £19.99 Blu-ray

The title is a bit of a misnomer: the nine British supporting features collected here are inarguably short (although 30 minutes can sometimes feel like an eternity) but, with the odd exception, neither sharp nor shocking. A pair of 1949 films offers a rare chance to see weird fiction great Algernon Blackwood tell two of his own stories: despite his considerable radio experience, Blackwood is not a screen natural, and the overall effect is of charming somnolence; despite initial fascination, I nodded off at one point. A highly theatrical, one-man take on Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart* (1953) by Stanley Baker is the highlight of disc one – lost for many years, now happily found. Two 1958 films by the Hungarian playboy Theodore Zichy are mildly diverting mysteries.

In the space between discs one and two, a sexual revolution has intervened, so expect boobies. Brian Cummins's visually inventive *Twenty-Nine* (1969) and Derek Robbins's visually grotty *The Sex Victims* (1973) offer sleazy strip clubs and naked nymphs on horseback respectively; the former is let down by a bathetic twist ending, the latter by its sheer leering dullness. *The Lake* (1978) is atmospheric, although silly and slow, but David McGillivray's *The Errand* (1980) is a grim little oddity.

I'm all for unearthing neglected films, but while my inner archivist applauds this potentially valuable set, it frequently makes for dull viewing; the booklet of essays by William Fowler, Vic Pratt and Jo Botting is often more entertaining than what's on screen. Lacking any compelling reason to be watched together, the eccentric shorts collected here feel a bit like a random assortment from down the back of the BFI's sofa.

David Sutton



THE REVEREND'S REVIEW

FT's resident man of the cloth REVEREND PETER LAWS dons his dog collar and faces the flicks that Church forgot! (www.peterlaws.co.uk)

It Came from Outer Space

Dir Jack Arnold, US 1953
Fabulous Films, £12.99 (Blu-ray)

Inner Sanctum Mysteries: The Complete Film Series

Dir Remi Weekes, UK 2020
Eureka Entertainment, £26.99 (Blu-ray)

Relic

Dir Brandon Cronenberg, UK/Canada 2020
On UK release from 27 November

When a giant, fiery golfball crashes in the Arizona desert, an amateur astronomer finds cast-iron proof of an alien craft... until the crater collapses and buries all the evidence. At first, the townsfolk just chuckle at his claims. Then they start doing strange things, like staring directly into the Sun.

It Came from Outer Space was scripted by Ray Bradbury, and it's not hard to spot. Characters don't just talk, they stare off wistfully while delivering workingman's poetry: "The desert's alive," says the astronomer Putnam, "and it'll kill you in one of a thousand ways." Or when the town sheriff casually says: "Did you know, Putnam, more people are murdered at 92 degrees Fahrenheit than any other temperature?"

Sure, the film has monsters – a big, veiny cyclops creature in fact – yet what really chilled the 1950s audience was the film's demonstration of just how malleable the human mind might be. Released in 1953, *It Came from Outer Space* became the blueprint for decades of paranoid science fiction.

Fans wanting to experience the 3D version will be



"The desert's alive, and it'll kill you in one of a thousand ways"

disappointed to hear that this Blu-ray release only offers the trailer in that format. Yet actors randomly sticking things into the camera for the 'whoool' effect can't detract from a first-rate, unexpected sci-fi classic.

Keeping it black and white, we have *Inner Sanctum Mysteries: The*



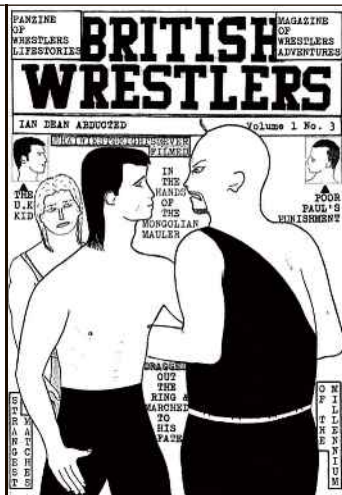
Complete Film Series, out on Blu-ray from Eureka. Universal made six of these moody yarns between 1943 and 1945, inspired by (but not based on) the 'Inner Sanctum' old-time radio series. All are present here, and feature tales of eerie wax museums, artists blinded by acid, and hypnotism. Playing the lead in all six is Lon Chaney Jr, who often gets overshadowed by names like Karloff, Lugosi and, not least, his own father, widely revered as 'The Man with A Thousand Faces'. It's ironic, then, that what lingers for me with the Chaney family isn't the father's many faces, but his son's own face. There's just something about his eyes, his smile, that gets to me. It's a sweetness, a sadness – qualities he even projected through yak's hair in his most iconic role as the Wolf Man. Chaney Jr's first wife left him. She said he was too "sullen". You see that in this set, and it somehow draws you to him.

The films are a mix of crime/noir with hints of the supernatural, my favourite being the gripping and twisty 'Weird Wife'. Here, Chaney plays a university professor whose new wife might just be a jungle witch. Brace yourself for a surprisingly intense ending.

We finish with a horror film in full colour, no less. In *Relic*, an elderly mother goes missing from her country home, so the daughter and granddaughter travel back there to find her. But what is the strange mould seeping from the walls of the house? And why does the granddaughter keep forgetting how many flights of stairs there are? *Relic* opts for the slow build-up of dread rather than sharp, sudden shocks – which is particularly fitting given the themes of the film. In fact, viewers worried about ageing parents may find themselves haunted, even upset by this story, particularly in the startling final scene. Yet they also might be strangely comforted by what this film does so well: it shares the pain.

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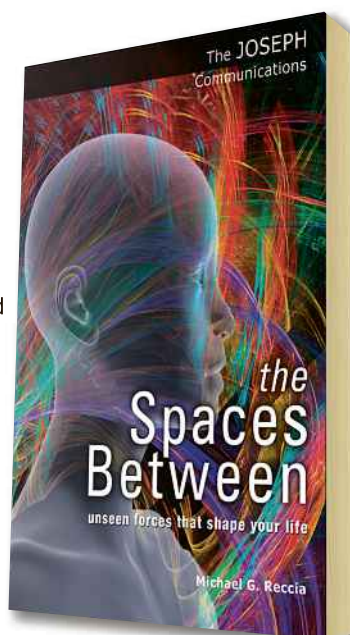
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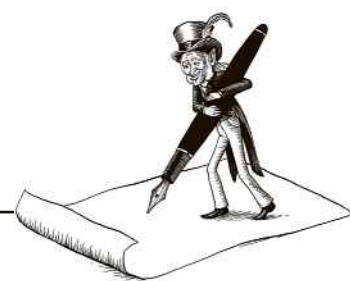
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Bird crashes

Terry Warburton's letter about the imprint of a bird on his window [FT400:74] reminded me of a similar experience. About 10 years ago my wife and I visited Burford Wildlife Park in Oxfordshire. Walking around, we came to a large slab of glass. I forget what it was for – I think something, a map perhaps, was engraved on it – but my attention was drawn to a perfect imprint of a pigeon at about eye level. Slightly higher, to the right of it, was the imprint of a falcon, or some similar predator. At the base of the glass slab were both birds, quite dead. We stood there for while, and a keeper came bustling along to remove the corpses. We spoke to him about it and it seemed that it was something that happened every now and then when a pigeon was being pursued by a predator, but it was rare for both birds involved to suffer the same fate.

Laurence Stockdale

By email

I was doing some washing up at the kitchen sink a couple of years back when a bird flew into the window. I went outside to see if it was injured, but it was nowhere to be seen. However, a hedgehog had become stuck in the kitchen sink drain cover, which I had removed earlier for cleaning and not replaced. I managed to get it out with no apparent ill effects. Did the bird try and warn me? I like to think so.

Peter Jackson

St Ives, Cambridgeshire

Editor's note: FT has often been sent dramatic examples of avian window prints. For our first examples, see FT63:6.

Dire Wolf

There's a more tangible connection to cryptozoology on the Grateful Dead's *Workingman's Dead* album [FT400:24-25] – the song title 'Dire Wolf'. 'Brown-Eyed Women' on *Europe '72* mentions "Bigfoot County", which has given its name to a Grateful Dead tribute band (see downtownroanoke.org), and the Dead also covered Warren Zevon's

SIMULACRA CORNER



Peter Dawson snapped this rather anguished olive tree man as he dashed for a ferry in the port of Lipari (the largest of the Aeolian islands off the northern coast of Sicily) in the summer of 2020.

We are always glad to receive pictures of spontaneous forms and figures, or any curious images. Send them (with your postal address) to Fortean Times, PO Box 66598, London N11 9EN or to sieveking@forteantimes.com.

'Werewolves of London' in the late Seventies (see *Dick's Picks, Volume 25*, for example).

Richard George

St Albans, Hertfordshire

Feline revenant

Seventeen years ago my father wrote an account of an experience he had with a ghostly cat, which was published in *FT*. This has been spoken of many times within my family over the years, especially as he died less than two years after his letter was printed, but unfortunately we

never kept the issue. I was an *FT* subscriber from about the age of 15, which is how my father came across the magazine. However, I fell away from it about six years ago and did not buy an issue until three months ago, when I decided to subscribe again. To then see this long lost account from my much-loved father reprinted in your 400th issue ['Wellington Returns' by Roy C Cotterill, FT400:38], was a pleasant surprise for my family and me. I'm not sure if it was fate or coincidence that drew me to pick up your magazine again,

but it certainly felt like there was something pushing me back here. So thank you.

Simon Cotterill

Wigan, Greater Manchester

Animal ghosts

The recent Ghostwatch column regarding porcine apparitions [FT400:18-21] got me thinking about the nature of animal spirits in general and why it might be that certain animal types are witnessed in ghostly form more than others. Could human influence be a factor? The most commonly reported spirit animals are dogs, cats and horses, all animals that have been domesticated successfully by humans and lived by their side for millennia. Is it possible that such long interaction with humans has led to these specific animals being more likely to appear after death?

This is of course only speculation and I have no explanation for the appearance of non-human ghosts. The connection with humans could be reflected in the perceived threat level ingrained in the haunting. It seems that cat hauntings are by and large relatively harmless and ghost dogs of the domestic variety are also fairly benevolent. Black dogs such as Black Shuck are an exception to this and may be something else entirely. Ghostly horses are often perceived with an accompanying human presence that often dictates the feeling of the encounter. Headless horses add a more sinister note.

Ghost animals outside of these categories, particularly in the British Isles, are often associated with malice and fear, perhaps because they are the shades of creatures with which we have had little interaction on a domestic level – such as the 'ghost bear' of the Tower of London, the phantom bird of Lincoln's Inn and Athelhampton Hall's infamous 'ghost ape'. Perhaps the Shropshire Man-Monkey would also qualify? I'm interested to hear other readers' views on this.

Aaron Bulley

By email

LETTERS

Under a cloud

I enjoyed Alan Murdie's Ghost-watch article, 'Vile Piggishness', covering porcine paranormality. It brought to mind a poltergeist case from Runcorn in 1952, centred on teenager John Jones who lived on Byron Street. The case can easily be uncovered online and was reported on by the Runcorn *Guardian* at the time. The polt busied itself with the usual polt activity, banging a dressing table, opening and closing drawers, throwing clocks around and the like. However, a peculiar twist occurred when over 50 pigs were slaughtered at nearby Crowther's Farm. The slaughtering apparently did not occur by human hands; the blame was laid at the door of a 7ft [2m] floating black cloud, which had also attacked the wife of the farmer. The farmer in question apparently saw the cloud following John down the road, the inference being that it was the polt that had killed the pigs. Why drag the pigs into it? Hard to say, but it's a question which could also be reasonably asked regarding the Gadarene swine story.

Daniel Clay
Formby, Merseyside

The Aintree Spectres

Rob Gandy concludes that the field haunted by the Aintree Spectres [FT399:38-42] is without any particular eldritch aspect, but I beg to differ. Not only is it near running water, oft noted as a landscape feature significant in folklore, but also the 1830 map gives us two more clues as to its precarious position in a supernatural sandwich. On one side of the field we see a crossroads, a liminal space where one might meet the Devil, lay a ghost or, indeed, hold a sabbat. On the other side we see the curiously named Hob Lane. Hobs are the mischievous bogeys of the English countryside (see FT330:58-59). If life were like a Nigel Kneale teleplay, then all we would need now would be a new housing estate to be built

on the field for all hell to break loose...

Lewis JW Hurst
Tokyo, Japan

The first map in the Aintree Spectre article shows to the east of the chapel an interesting road name – Hob Lane – a name often associated with odd things. In the north a hob was a household spirit (goblin, bogle, brownie, whatever). And Old Hob is the Devil. In Chapter 9 of *The White Goddess* (1948) by Robert Graves (who mixed invention with his researches) there is a reference to the Lily White Boys (under "T for Tinne"), associating them with Druidic trees (and the crucified Oak King). Oak trees can be "cloaked in green". Aintree = one tree.

Stephen Shaw
Stockport, Cheshire

I enjoyed Rob Gandy's article on the Aintree Spectres. It reminded me of a similar incident I came across on the Internet, but situated at the opposite end of Lancashire. I was looking for "Halifax Ghosts" and was directed to fra forums (<http://forum.fellrunner.org.uk>). There was a message from "Alf" dated 12 Mar 2012 describing how he was driving home to Lancashire along the A58 Halifax to Rochdale road when his headlights picked out three figures dressed in white. He speculated that they were either ghosts, real people in sheets, sheep rustlers or wannabe klansmen. This occurred on Blackstone Edge near The White House, an old coaching inn.

There were a few "well fancy that" type of comments before a character named Steve reported that they were "some sort of coloured (sic) religious mob who believe there is some sacred ground across from The White House. I see 'em regular driving through Ripponden". Ripponden is a nearby small village on the Yorkshire side of the border. Steve also reported that they go to The White House regularly. That was all there was on the subject.

Unlike the field near Aintree,

this corner of Lancashire is well served for arcane lore. The most obvious antiquity is the old packhorse road, which for many years was thought to be Roman. Whatever its origin, it was known as the Dhoul's Pavement, "Dhoul" being a local name for the Devil. Alongside this old track there is the base of a Christian cross and an old standing stone called the Aiggin Stone. It is said that from here Robin Hood threw a large stone some six miles into Lancashire. There is also a rock formation known as Robin Hood's Bed where the outlaw was supposed to have had a kip. At one time there was a labyrinth laid out here, but by the 1990s little remained of it.

Mike Haigh
Hebden Bridge, West Yorkshire

Rob Gandy's speculation that the hooded and robed figures seen over the course of several decades near Aintree may have been a local fundamentalist Christian group is highly unlikely. Such sects would run a mile from anything even remotely redolent of pagan practices. Dressing up in conical hoods and long robes would not only be too Catholic (like the Spanish *penitentes*), but dancing around in a field at night positively satanic. My feeling is that this group are possibly one of the many strange cults invented by eccentric antiquarians in the last century. There would be some historical record, especially since they don't seem to have taken too much trouble to hide their activities. My suggestion would be to search the archives to discover whose graves were vandalised in the 1980s. Discovering the object of their hatred might give a clue to their purposes.

Michael Sherlock
By email

The feature about the robed and cowed figures in Aintree brought back a vague memory. Several times a year, Army cadets in Manchester, (in my case between 1976-1980) were trucked off to one of two mili-

tary bases for in-depth training. If it wasn't Leek Camp in Staffordshire, it would be the Altcar Training Area up on the Lancashire coast, near Southport and Formby – and about eight miles [13km] from Aintree. Usually in spring, there'd be a long week at Altcar. A couple of hundred Army Cadets living in relative isolation, in an unfamiliar place away from the usual support systems of home and family, provide an ideal environment for tall stories to flourish. Anyway, one tale I heard concerned the scary satanic monks in long white robes who were seen to walk the fields "nearby" carrying burning fiery crosses. That's why it wasn't safe to go out at night, as they would rip your heart out and sacrifice it to the Devil. As I recall, Altcar Camp had permanent resident staff who might have taken skewed glee in scaring visiting cadets with the story.

Paul Catlow
Heaton Norris, Cheshire

Cats and dogs

I found the review by the Hierophant's Apprentice of *Cat Country* by Di Francis an interesting read. Regarding her thought that the legendary black dogs occasionally encountered may really have been big black cats, I would question whether that holds water. From what I have read of such encounters, the black dog appears to confront the witness, and is often perceived to be conveying some sort of warning. The majority of big cat sightings appear to be either from a distance, or quite fleeting, as the animal bounds across a road or over a fence into the bushes. Although it is quite possible that some perceived big cats could in fact be dogs, I think it is less likely that witnesses believing they encounter confrontational black dogs are actually seeing big cats.

The Apprentice suggests it would have been helpful if the book had a table of big cats' dimensions, as a guide to witness descriptions. I think that unless a person has some sort



of expertise or experience in the field of big cats, they are unlikely to know the size of the average leopard, for example, so any report of something “about the size of” a leopard would be fairly subjective.

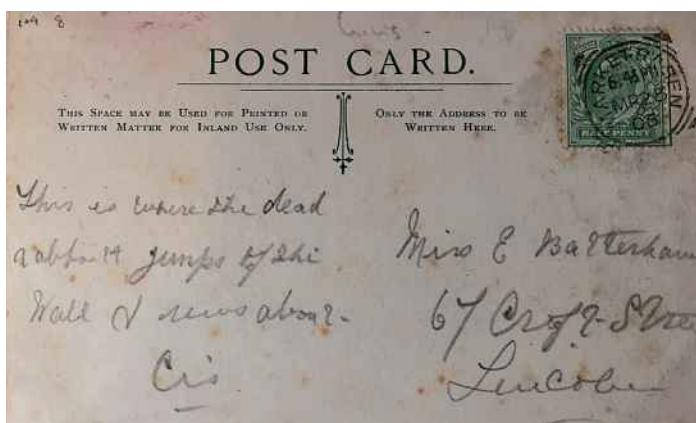
Dave Miles
By email

Orang kardil

During my many trips to the jungles of Sumatra, I have heard much tell of the *orang-kardil* mentioned by Karl Shuker [FT398:27]. The natives stress that it is quite distinct from the *orang pendek*. The former is smaller and more human-looking. It has long hair on the head, but a hairless body. The *orang kardil* fashions tools and weapons, whereas the *orang pendek* just hurls rocks and sticks. They are said to use fire and hunt with bamboo spears tipped with poison.

Our late guide, Sahar Dimus, told us of an encounter his father (also now deceased) had with a group of these hominins in 1981. He and a friend had been in a remote area of what is now Kerinci Seblat National Park. They were trading rice for other goods. Having crossed a high ridge, they made camp in a clearing one evening. As they cooked rice over a fire a tiny human-like figure appeared. The interloper began to steal rice from the cooking pot and Saha's father's friend killed it with a *parang* (a long jungle knife not unlike a machete). Soon after this senseless act, more of the tiny people emerged from the jungle and killed the man with bamboo spears. They did not attack Sahar's father. The *orang kardil* had not been seen in recent years and Sahar feared that they might now be extinct.

In 2013 French filmmaker Christophe Killian and I gathered the greatest number of *orang pendek* witnesses together in a Sumatran village on the edge of the national park. All had seen *orang pendek*, but none had witnesses the *orang kardil*, though all had heard of it. Similar reports have filtered down from the jungles of Flores and other Indonesian islands. It is not im-



possible that *Homo floresiensis* or something closely related to it is surviving on a number of islands in the chain.

Richard Freeman
Exeter, Devon

Binbrook Farm

Jan Bondeson's enjoyable series on postcards of fortaean interest led me to dig out this example from my own collection. Entitled “Bewitched Farm, Binbrook, Lincs”, it refers to the fascinating 1905 haunting of Walk Farm in the Lincolnshire Wolds. The case involved some quite extreme and remarkable reported phenomena, including the farm foreman being wheeled about in his own wheelbarrow by an invisible force in front of several witnesses, and a dead rabbit on a kitchen hook which came back to life and ran around before returning to the hook.

This postcard was posted locally on 25 March 1905, within weeks of the above events and

bears the message: “This is where the dead rabbit jumps off the wall and runs about”.

Here is a link with more details: <http://hauntedohiobooks.com/news/a-bewitched-farm-house-at-binbrook/>

On holiday in Lincolnshire in August 2020, we stopped at the farm to take a couple of photos. It still looks very much as it does on the postcard. As we were pulling away, we caught a glimpse of a large hare gazing at us from long grass right at the road's edge. Appropriately enough, it was unclear whether it was alive or dead!

Mark Graham
Huddersfield, West Yorkshire

Editor's note: The Binbrook farm is famous for its fiery poltergeist; a servant girl was badly burnt on her back. See Charles Fort's Lo!, chap 14; the 'Binbrook triangle' in Larry Arnold's book Ablaze!; and his feature 'Fire Leynes', FT24:6-9. See also FT4:15, 23:28+31, 42:48, 63:48, 66:63.

Phantom footsteps

I lived next door to a family in Thornton Le Moor, North Yorkshire. They had a ghost who would turn all the door handles, tantalisingly. All done for show it seemed. I couldn't help but wonder, if ghosts are incorporeal beings, why do some of them have audible footsteps?

Dana Kincaid
By email

Alan Murdie responds:

Our writer presupposes that ghostly footsteps are attributable to spirit entities that come equipped with bodies and feet like human beings, and interact on some level with our dimension. This is the traditional 'unquiet spirit' hypothesis as the cause of ghostly manifestations. We cannot be sure of this and unfortunately there is no proof for the idea, there being plenty of other alternative theories and ideas around. If ghosts are hallucinatory experiences, then footsteps are as hallucinatory as the ghostly feet. However, this can go on to cause further conceptual problems for which various solutions may be proposed. For example, Andrew Green – author of Ghost Hunting: A Practical Guide (1973, 2016) – proposed an electromagnetic theory of ghosts: “The recording of phantom footsteps may appear to pose a problem, for if they are in fact hallucinatory and not physical, how can their sound be electronically recorded? The answer is that if photographic emulsion can register the unseen, then magnetic tape can register electrical impulses from the atmosphere which are unheard by human ears as well as those that are heard. Videotape, used in the recording and re-recording of television programmes, collects sounds never heard by humans, for they are only created by electrical impulses in the first place.”

Again, this is just one theory about complex experiences and facts. All we can say is that sounds reminiscent of footsteps have often been reported from haunted locations and there may be a variety of explanations for the experience, ranging from natural causes to possible paranormal ones.



Statue lore

Regarding “The Peril of Moving Statues” by Alan Murdie [FT398:32-39]: In the 1970s I bought a book from the school book club called *Strange Unsolved Mysteries* (1974) by Margaret Ronan. A chapter called “The Restless Statue” concerns the bronze statue of a soldier, named by its artist as Sorrow, at the entrance of a military cemetery on the Saigon-Bienhoa road in what was then South Vietnam. The stories given come from the 1960s. People say that they had seen the statue walk around and it had warned them of attacks by the enemy. They left it offerings of food and water. According to the locals, ‘he’ couldn’t rest whilst there is fighting in Vietnam. It would be interesting to hear if he still perambulates.

The Rollright Stones (top left) on the Warwickshire-Oxfordshire border are said to be an army that tried to conquer England in the Dark Ages, but were turned to stone by a patriotic witch. They are said to go down to Little Rollright Brook to drink at midnight at certain times of the year. Naughty children in the locality were told that if they did not behave then the stones would come up from the brook and carry them



off. At midnight at other times, they become stone men who dance around in the air. It is not a good idea to witness this, as it is said to drive you mad.

At Avebury is the Swindon Stone (top right), which stands next to the A4361 Swindon Road. The tour guide said, I suspect tongue-in-cheek, that this particular stone gambols across the road if Swindon FC wins a match. He pointed to some marks on the road (above) as evidence.

Gary Stocker
By email

I really enjoyed Alan Murdie’s article about moving statues, but looked in vain for reference to one of the best examples that brought such phenomena to public consciousness. I am of course referring to the

wonderful Bonzo Dog Doo Dah Band’s 1967 song ‘Equestrian Statue’ where said monument, a memorial to a “very famous man”, goes “prancing up and down the square” making “little old ladies stop ‘n’ say ‘Well, I declare!’” For those FT readers far too young to remember the Bonzos, I recommend checking it out on Youtube [www.youtube.com/watch?v=s5_teU-u9jMc]. As the song says ‘It’s guaranteed to brighten up your day – if it’s grey!’

Rob Gandy
By email

A significant omission from the iconoclasm timeline [FT398:37] is the April 2003 toppling of Saddam Hussain’s statue in Baghdad.

Henry Chester
London

The article on moving statues reminded me of an interesting American case. In the Vicksburg National Military Park there is a memorial for soldiers from the state of Wisconsin who died during the Battle of Vicksburg during the Civil War. On top of the memorial is the statue of an eagle representing Old Abe, which was the mascot of the Wisconsin units. According to legend, the eagle will fly at midnight.

Gregory Sumrall
Biloxi, Mississippi

I thoroughly enjoyed the moving statue feature and was intrigued once again by the description of the barber-surgeon of Avebury having been ‘crushed’ beneath one of the collapsed stones. I have read that his skeleton was found in a scooped and hollowed space, and that the rock appeared to have been lowered, rather than dropped on him. If true, this would suggest that, rather than being the victim of an accident, he was instead a member of the ‘Unclean Dead’ (suicides, murder victims, etc), and that the rock was laid where it was to keep him down and stop his spirit from harassing the district. Can someone confirm this?

Arthur Burton
Maidstone, Kent

Mitcham critter

I seem to recall back in 1992/1993 locals in Mitcham, southwest London, talking about a series of sightings of a “bear-like creature”, often spotted on Mitcham Common. My mother witnessed it and was adamant that it was not a cat, as it was far too large; it resembled what she described as a “young bear”. I don’t know if it was an alien/anomalous big cat, or possibly an escapee from a travelling circus (as one of those always sets up camp on the Common every year, and back in the 1990s animal acts were much more common than they are now). The whole saga was featured in the local paper – so what was it that so many people saw?

Phil Brand
London

Out of place

In 1995, with a companion, I saw, and stared at, an Ibis, casually perched where it should not have been. We rushed home and were accused of being mistaken, until it transpired that one had escaped and migrated to our locale. Within two years another one joined it, and both still living wild. The verge-exploring ostrich my disbelieving friends saw while commuting in Somerset was also clearly all too real; there are quite a few on farms in the vicinity and they will kick their way out of wooden pens with ease. The ‘snake’ my cat was harassing, when onlookers came to knock, was a peeved slow worm. It had taken refuge under a warped Perspex sheet, thus looked exotically hued and slightly magnified. The cat was bribed away and the slow worm carefully rescued. I was saddened that I was the only person who had ever seen one or knew what it was.

My friend worked on a golf course, and dumped there during a six year period were numerous exotic snakes, reptiles, and amphibians, some clearly previously well cared for, a few less so. All were relocated safely. But who dumps a mature boa or an expensive, large, iguana on

a busy fairway when they could more easily sell it? And who would release two bullfrogs, unless they wanted to deliberately destroy the ecosystem?

Also on the golf course was a report of a tiger, which was a tiger-size print fairground prize cuddly toy, blown onto a waterway bank. A crocodile/alligator scare revealed an inflatable stuck under a hedge. Frequent reports of freakish miniature ursine beings were all accurate, though: *Sooty & Sweep* was sometimes filmed on location there.

Lucy Brown
Pilton, Somerset

Higher beings

Dorothy, Shirley Collins’s mother [FT399:69], “perceived that the small silver beings were in control of larger beings ‘not seen but felt, and benign.’” This reminded me of something in *Magick Without Tears* by Aleister Crowley: “My observation of the Universe convinces me that there are beings of intelligence and power of a far higher quality than anything we can conceive of as human; that they are not necessarily based on the cerebral and nervous structures that we know, and that the one and only chance for mankind to advance as a whole is for individuals to make contact with such beings.” Now, I’m not saying go out and do it. That’s your lookout.

James Wright
Westcliff-on-Sea, Essex

Holman Hunt’s gnomes

In the October 1904 issue of *The Nineteenth Century and After*, Paul Chapman reminiscences about his friendship with the poet Coventry Patmore. Patmore had been a friend of John Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelite artists. Chapman tells the curious story of an encounter between Patmore, the painter William Holman Hunt, and a gnome.

“[Patmore] said that one evening he was staying in a house together with Mr Holman Hunt. They were in a room with double

folding doors, and were sitting alone together, when, looking through into the further room, which was lit up, he saw a little figure seated on the corner of the table. It was alive and looked about, and was dressed in a quaint dress with a little peaked hat shaped like a harebell, and with pointed shoes. He called Holman Hunt’s attention to the figure seen by himself, and Holman Hunt saw it equally distinctly. Taking some paper, the latter made a sketch of it exactly as it seemed to him to sit there, the sketch corresponding in every particular with Coventry Patmore’s vision of the same. On looking for it again the figure had disappeared.”

This is not the only anecdote involving Holman Hunt and a gnome. In *The Spectator* (1 Mar 2008), Paul Johnson relates a story told by Lord Tennyson. “Tennyson loved jokes, stored them up, and told them beautifully. Many were rustic items from his Lincolnshire youth. Others were modern. He said: ‘They say I write about the fairies as if I knew them, and they ask, “What are fairies really like?”’ He then told the story of the New Forest gnome: Holman Hunt went into the forest to get some studies of foliage on paper. Sitting in a glade he was so absorbed in his work that he did not notice that a little brown man, not three feet high, had crept up behind him. Then he saw a little brown arm stretch out and take his bottle.

He looked round, and the little brown man said eagerly: ‘Gin?’ “No’, said Hunt, firmly. ‘Water’. The little brown man vanished immediately.”

Who knows? Perhaps there is a sketch of a little man in pointed shoes by Holman Hunt hidden away somewhere in an archive.

Nick Louras
Westchester, New York

Beware the pugot

Readers might be interested in the following account of a poltergeist from the Ilocano people, of the northern Philippines.

“The Ilocanos fear the *pugot* which can take several forms, sometimes that of a cat with fiery [sic] eyes; at times that of a sinister dog which gradually increases in size or a black giant with horrifying dimensions. Imagine him, my dear readers, seated on the windowsill of a house, 18m [59ft] high, his feet touching the ground. The common people say the *pugot* smokes giant-sized cigars. The natives of Vigan recount that in the year 1865 to 1867 a rain of stones fell over a house for some nights and it was blamed on some unknown pranksters. The house was surrounded by policemen but this did not stop the rain of stones. Most of the stones were thrown with force, but curiously, no one got hurt. According to the Ilocano version, the *pugot* (*cafre* to Spaniards) lives in empty rooms of old houses or in the ruins of old buildings. For this reason, I believe that the *pugot* is one of the household *anitos* of olden times.” [Source: I de los Reyes, *El Folk-Lore Filipino* (trs. SC Dizon & MEP Imson; Diliman, Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1994):57]. I have the original German text, published in 1888, on file.

Marinus van der Sluijs
Vancouver, Canada



“It was a great day’s hunting, even if it did get me a lifetime ban from the zoo.”

It Happened to Me...

Woodland ceremony

Regarding the Aintree Spectres [FT399:38-42], I feel compelled to share an experience I had at Woolley Edge near J38 on the M1 near Wakefield on 20 November 2020. Because of the COVID 19 situation, I was working from home at Hall Green in Wakefield, and my partner was also at home. At lunchtime I suggested a walk of a couple of miles down quiet local country lanes.

As we walked along Common Lane, we heard what I initially took to be children's voices in the wood off to my left. In a clearing, where there is a disused quarry set back from the road, I could see white-robed figures dancing and chanting. They were adults, some distance through the trees, and somewhat indistinct. I climbed an earth bank and took this picture (right). The white-robed figures, numbering about 10, were moving in a circle clockwise, and singing what sounded like an ululating African tribal song – think of the residents on Kong's Skull Island chanting.

As we continued down Common Lane towards the junction with Woolley Low Moor Lane, the figures passed from view. I was tempted to investigate but worried about offending or interrupting some social gathering, and equally unsettled by what looked like some pagan ritual in a remote spot. It certainly crossed my mind that this is how horror films start – with people blundering into mysterious rituals in isolated spots. My thoughts naturally ran to *The Wicker Man* and the recent *Midsommar* film. There certainly seemed to be something pagan about the event. The gathering was on a Friday lunchtime and I pondered who might gather in remote woods for some ritual at lunchtime on a working day. I don't believe this was any kind of Islamic Friday prayers gathering. In any case, this was miles from any mosque or



local Asian community.

The spot was in a disused quarry in woodland just behind Woolley View (a viewing spot with panoramic views out towards the Yorkshire Sculpture Park) and close to the picturesque Woolley Village and Woolley Edge motorway services. A lay-by in the vicinity was occupied by several parked cars, more than one would expect for that time on a weekday.

Jason Hanrahan
By email

"Juliana was right"

When I was teaching in Cambridgeshire, I had a great friend called Bill Farrar. Bill and I were like brothers; I thought the world of him. One day he phoned to say, "I've been told I have six weeks left to live, will you come over and see me before I go?" I replied, "Of course I will." For the next six weeks, I drove from Cardiff to Cambridge to spend the weekends with Bill. Then I got a call from Bill's village priest, Ian, who said that Bill had passed over. One of his last requests had been for me to conduct the funeral service

in the village church. I agreed. Father Ian said, "Come over on Thursday night. Stay with me in the rectory; we'll do the service together on Friday morning." Now I am not psychic at all, my feet are very much on the ground, very much a Harley Davidson rider, but while we arranged the service, I saw Bill. The last time I had seen him alive he weighed six stone, but he was healthy again, back in his 20s, and he gave me a great big smile. I could feel the happiness coming off him; it was like sunlight. He said to me, "Tell Ian, Juliana was absolutely right." And then he was gone.

Ian had seen and heard nothing. I felt if I told him what I had seen then he was going to think that I was coming off the wall, but if this were the other way around, Bill would have done it for me, no question. I took a deep breath and said, "Ian I am sorry if this sounds strange, but I have just seen Bill. He looked young again; he was radiant, and he asked me to tell you, Juliana was absolutely right." Ian nearly fell off his chair. He said, "You can't have known that."

He went on to explain that during the last 20 minutes of Bill's life he had told him the story of Lady Juliana [Julian] of Norwich [born 1343], who had been made a saint. Everyone thought she was ill when she seemed to be about to faint. She recovered and explained that she had just seen Heaven, where everyone was ecstatic with happiness; as she put it, "All shall be well... all manner of things shall be well." Ian and I prepared the rest of the funeral service with great joy brought by Bill's message. When you have an experience like that, you take more of an interest in mysteries and the supernatural.

Rev Lionel Fanthorpe
Cardiff, South Wales

Bleached dusters

After a long sojourn in Scotland I came home via the Pennine valleys, as far south as Yorkshire. It was dark and murky. I stopped the car at what looked like a granite ridge (I am a geologist) and shone my torch out into the night. Moving about between stone gullies I could make out an emaciated creature in a dark indigo/thorny-hued jumpsuit. It had a roundish head with two protuberances on top of it. It carried what seemed like a bunch of bleached dusters and a gun-like device. It didn't respond to my light, and seemed unconcerned. I felt it was humming to itself (a coarse sound – like a husky smoker). I would guess at a height of 5ft 6in (1.68m). I drove off, having nothing further to see. I report no loss of time or distress or strange condition.

Tollwena
By email

Editor's note: We requested further information about this intriguing anecdote, emailed to Fortean Towers in 2011, but never heard back. If Tollwena reads this, perhaps she could provide further details. We are all ears.

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PECULIAR POSTCARDS

JAN BONDESON shares another deltiological discovery from his prodigious collection of postcards. This month's pictorial blast from the past features a champion of Sunday trading who became Britain's most famous newsagent



12. A WYCOMBE ANTI-SABBATARIAN



ABOVE LEFT: A postcard stamped and posted in 1904 showing Jacob Popp's newsagent's shop at 14 Frogmoor. ABOVE RIGHT: Mr Popp stands proudly in front of his little shop. BELOW: Mr Popp's shop as it appears today, with two ghostly Popp's signs visible on the second floor. FACING PAGE: A series of six unposted 'funny' colour postcards showing Jacob Popp selling goods on a Sunday, before being threatened by a police constable, tried, and put in the stocks, before triumphing in the end.

Jacob Ivanovitch Popp was born in 1873, in Pernau, Russian Estonia, but by 1891 he had settled in England. In 1899, he married Philadelphia Priscilla Moon at Sevenoaks in Kent, and they went on to have four daughters. By 1901 the Popp family had moved to High Wycombe, where Jacob set up business as a newsagent in a small shop at 14 Frogmoor. Since money was scarce, his wife had to work as a live-in domestic cook to make ends meet. Mrs Popp's sister Annie, who had married a man named Albert Kellaway, lived with the Pops, and Jacob employed Kellaway as his assistant in the shop.

In December 1901, the obscure newsagent Jacob Popp made it into the 'legal' column of the local newspapers for the first time. He was an anti-Sabbatarian, who did not obey the Lord's Day Observance Act of Charles II and kept his shop open seven days a week. For this escapade, he was summoned before the local magistrates and

fined five shillings, with two shillings and sixpence costs. But Jacob Popp was a very stubborn man. In spite of repeated summons, and repeated fines, he kept his shop open every Sunday. He papered the shop walls with the summonses, and kept paying his fines.

In 1903, when Popp had been fined more than 70 times, the Wycombe anti-Sabbatarian became a newspaper celebrity, featured in both the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express*. All over Britain, the newspapers eschewed their usual xenophobia to tell the story of the plucky immigrant who took on the authorities for their archaic legal statutes. Newspapers as far away as New Zealand and Australia retold the story of Britain's most famous newsagent, and his stubborn fight against the authorities. The continued prosecutions were an excellent advertisement for Popp's little shop, he said, and he received letters of support from fellow anti-Sabbatarians

The local police constable had to be present to offer crowd control



not only from all over Britain, but also from France, Germany and the United States. Every Sunday, the Salvation Army band gave a concert outside his shop to show their support, and trade was brisk for Popp and his assistant as a consequence; indeed, the local police constable had to be present to

provide crowd control.

Jacob Popp did his best to present himself as a martyr to Sabbatarianism and legal obstructionism. In addition to two postcards featuring his little shop, he issued a series of six 'funny' postcards with doggerel verses featuring his escapades. A parade of 300 cyclists pedalled all the way from Harlesden to High Wycombe, where their leader gave a rousing speech outside Popp's shop, blaming Charles II and his archaic legal statutes for all the mischief that had been caused by the Wycombe authorities. Popp himself thought seven shillings and sixpence per week a cheap price for all the newspaper publicity for his little establishment and Sunday takings of between £20 and £30 per day.

In June 1909, the Wycombe magistrates had to admit defeat: after being continuously summoned every week for seven and half years, Jacob Popp had gained his victory. As a result,



When Charles the Second reigned as King
Some funny Laws he made,
And one of them was that to stop
All kinds of Sunday Trade.
When he was dead the people saw
This Law was an abuse,
In fact that it was like the Ring—
Of very little use.



On one fine day the Councillors
Of Wycombe Town all met,
And said "We must enforce this Law,
For we've done nothing yet.

"To lessen either Rate or Tax
Would surely be a crime,
Let's start with this old musty Law
Of Charles the Second's time."

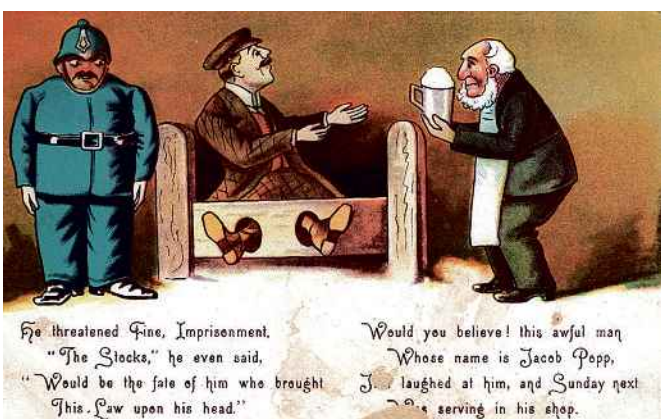


They dug it up and looked around
To see on whom to drop,
And finally they found a man
Whose name is Jacob Popp.
They Summoned their Head Constable
And unto him did say:
"Go, tell J. Popp of his vile crime,
And how we'll make him pay."



They dragged him up before the Bench
Of Justices, in line,
Who scowled at him and said
"We must inflict a heavy fine."

He paid, and every Sunday
Finds him serving in his Shop,
And every Monday morning
There's a Summons for J. Popp.



He threatened Fine, Imprisonment,
"The Stocks," he even said,
"Would be the fate of him who brought
This Law upon his head."

Would you believe! this awful man
Whose name is Jacob Popp,
I laughed at him, and Sunday next
Was serving in his shop.



The Sequel you'll be pleased to learn,
Although they fine him still,

Is that this nonsense only puts
More money in his Till.

he sank back into obscurity, becoming just an ordinary newsagent once more. He was a sergeant in the wartime police force during the Great War, patrolling his section on a motor bicycle. His business prospered in the 1920s, and at one stage

he had two other newsagent's shops in High Wycombe in addition to his original shop. In 1937, he developed gangrene of the legs and had both of them amputated, but he never fully recovered and died in 1939, aged 65. His postcards, which are

today scarce, keep his memory alive, as well as a variety of press reports and a recent article in the *High Wycombe Society Newsletter* (Spring 2015). The little shop at 14 Frogmoor is today a branch of Subway; it caught fire in 2012, but the house

did not burn down. Curiously, the narrow house is still adorned, at second floor level, with two ghostly signs saying 'Popp's', a final memorial to the once-famous Wycombe anti-Sabbatarian who was active on the premises so many years ago.

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WHY FORTEAN?



FORTEAN TIMES is a monthly magazine of news, reviews and research on strange phenomena and experiences, curiosities, prodigies and portents. It was founded by Bob Rickard in 1973 to continue the work of Charles Fort (1874–1932).

Born of Dutch stock in Albany, New York, Fort spent many years researching scientific literature in the New York Public Library and the British Museum Library. He marshalled his evidence and set forth his philosophy in *The Book of the Damned* (1919), *New Lands* (1923), *Lo!* (1931), and *Wild Talents* (1932).

He was sceptical of dogmatic scientific explanations, observing how scientists argued according to their own beliefs rather than the rules of evidence and that inconvenient data were ignored, suppressed, discredited or explained away. He criticised modern science for its reductionism, its attempts to define, divide and separate. Fort's dictum "One measures a circle beginning anywhere" expresses instead his philosophy of Continuity

in which everything is in an intermediate and transient state between extremes.

He had ideas of the Universe-as-organism and the transient nature of all apparent phenomena, coined the term 'teleportation', and was perhaps the first to speculate that mysterious lights seen in the sky might be craft from outer space. However, he cut at the very roots of credulity: "I conceive of nothing, in religion, science or philosophy, that is more than the proper thing to wear, for a while."

Fort was by no means the first person to collect anomalies and oddities – such collections have abounded from Greece to China since ancient times. **Fortean Times** keeps alive this ancient task of dispassionate weird-watching, exploring the wild frontiers between the known and the unknown.

Besides being a journal of record, **FT** is also a forum for the discussion of observations and ideas, however absurd or unpopular, and maintains a position of benevolent scepticism towards both the orthodox and unorthodox. **FT** toes no party line.

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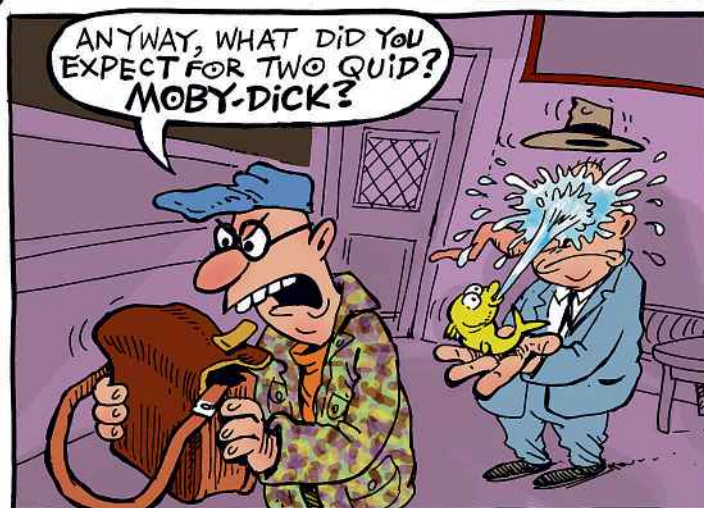
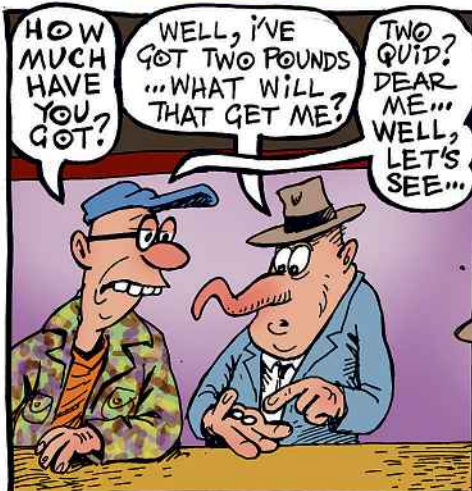
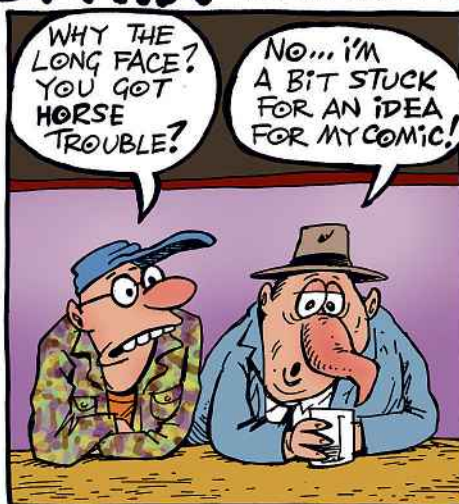
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FORTEAN TIMES 403

ON SALE 25 FEB 2021

STRANGE DEATHS

UNUSUAL WAYS OF SHUFFLING OFF THIS MORTAL COIL

Deborah Roberts, 47, was strangled to death after two dogs pulled on their leads which she was wearing around her neck as she walked them, an inquest heard. She had been walking two Staffordshire bull terriers in Wrexham when, it is believed, she may have stumbled due to her Huntington's disease, an inherited, degenerative condition, which causes mobility deterioration. It is possible that the dogs may have been trying to get her to stand up again after a fall by pulling on the leads. Ms Roberts's son Robert told the court that the two dogs, Tyson and Ruby, were "loving and caring pets. They are beautiful dogs. If you met them now they'd just jump up and lick you. All they were doing is trying to help my mum when she fell." Ms Roberts had been walking the dogs with her niece, who raised the alarm. A witness who arrived at the scene to help described how the two dogs were whimpering, adding that he could see Ms Roberts was unconscious. The death was ruled accidental, with the cause of death recorded as asphyxiation by strangulation. *BBC News, 3 Dec 2020.*

A woman fell 30ft (9m) to her death from a road bridge spanning the A21 near Tonbridge, Kent, after escaping her burning car. Azra Kemal, 24, suffered fatal injuries when she plunged through a gap between two sides of the dual carriageway. An inquest heard the road was "pitch dark" with no street lights at the time of her fall. A friend, Omar Allen, who had been in the Ford Focus with Ms Kemal, described how the pair had been visiting his mother in East Sussex, but had left after an argument over a broken lamp.

He said the car, which had caught fire on their journey back to London, was "hissing like it was going to blow up" before it "went up quite quickly in flames". They tried to flag down oncoming cars for help, he said, before Ms Kemal began to make her way back across the road towards the central reservation. "That's when I heard her fall. The scream went on for so long and it was far down." Paramedics were called, but despite their efforts she was pronounced dead at the scene from multiple severe injuries.

The inquest also heard how a police officer had encountered Ms Kemal earlier that evening, pulled over at the side of the A27 in East Sussex. The officer described her as "quite emotional" and

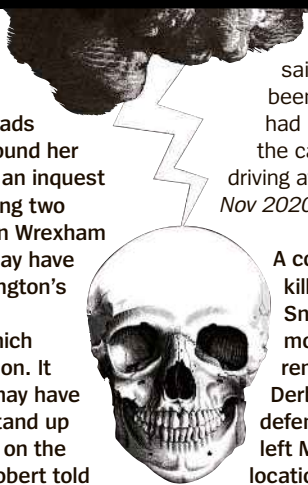
said she "looked like she had been crying." He recalled that she had "stumbled" as she got out of the car, before getting back in and driving away at speed. *BBC News, 12 Nov 2020.*

A court was told that a man who killed and dismembered Graham Snell, 71, in a bid to steal his money, dumped his victim's remains in a badger sett.

Derby Crown Court heard how defendant Daniel Walsh, 30, had left Mr Snell's body parts in various locations around Chesterfield. On

the last day he was seen alive, 19 June 2019, Mr Snell told police that Walsh had been stealing from his bank account, saying he had "a problem with a man who comes and stays at my house without being invited." The next morning, officers called at Mr Snell's home but by this time he was lying dead inside the house, while Walsh, also inside, refused to answer the door. On the following day, Walsh bought 10 rubble sacks and two large saws, and four days afterwards loaded two or three large black bags containing "many parts of Mr Snell's body" into a taxi, travelling to the location of a badger sett where he "buried or pushed" the body parts into the sett. Three days later, he once again travelled by taxi to dump parts of Mr Snell's torso in communal bins at a block of flats. They were discovered on 2 July, with the head and arms eventually being found in woods a short distance away in February 2020. The jury was also told Mr Walsh had previous convictions for stealing £5,000 from Mr Snell in 2009 and for assaulting him in 2014. Walsh was found guilty of murder and given a life sentence. *BBC News, 24 Nov; derbytelegraph.co.uk, 29 Nov 2020.*

A 63-year-old man in Russia was charged with murder after he beat a friend to death with a crowbar for saying that he played the accordion badly. The murderer finished off his 66-year-old victim by striking him on the head with a sledgehammer, dismembering him and disposing of the body parts in rubbish bins. The attack took place in a village near the city of Cheboksaray, 350 miles (563km) east of Moscow, after the two men had engaged in a drinking bout. State investigators said that after killing his friend, the murderer took some valerian, a herbal sleeping aid, and lay down for a nap. *Times, 2 Nov 2016.*



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